

(If I Didn't Know Better) I'd Say This Feels Pretty Good

by runboyrun

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Summary:

Stan had always hoped he could take solace in his conventionality. He wasn't particularly tall or short, heavy or thin, brilliant or idiotic. Stanley Uris toed the line of average like an acrobat. In fact, the only remarkable thing about him was just how unremarkable he was.

Richie had always been a little too sharp, a little too bright. He had an energy he never quite learned to contain and sensitivity he couldn't begin to control. He was cornered into a spotlight of scrutiny. With each step into greater success he stumbled further into his own demise.

1. ease

Author's Note:

please mind the tags, this is going to be a darker storyline than what i've written before.

thank you to hikash0 and breathplayed for supporting this mess.

Stan had always hoped he could take solace in his conventionality. He wasn't particularly tall or short, heavy or thin, brilliant or idiotic. Stanley Uris toed the line of average like an acrobat. In fact, the only remarkable thing about him was just how *unremarkable* he was. He blended into his surroundings like a true wallflower; camouflaged from the spotlight.

It was hard to stick to sidelines in a town as small as Derry, but Stan did it. Being bullied for his yarmulke and curls since children could learn to hone their hostility taught him just how valuable being unnoticed could be.

He wasn't *alone* though, he had Bill. Big Bill, Stan would call him when he was sure the boy couldn't hear. He wasn't unremarkable - Bill stood as tall as the sky, even as a child. At least, he stood over Stan.

Bill was going to be a Sentinel. Everyone in town said so - his father was one. "Good genes!" They always said. Stan didn't fully understand what that meant, not at six. But, from what he'd heard his mama saying over tea, Bill would be strong and fast and 'sharper' than the other kids.

Stan had smiled when he'd heard it. Bill sounded like a superhero.

Bill's dad didn't seem like much of one.

He was always home. Every time Stan tip toed his way through the front door he could see the hazy gray eyes of Mr. Denbrough staring wide at him from his lazy chair. The whole house was like that.

Instead of ‘don’t touch that, Stanley’ like when he was in Temple it was more ‘don’t even *breathe*, Stanley’. They never played inside - Bill always took to the streets of Derry like a bat out of Hell when he could.

They only ever came back to Bill’s house to eat or play with Georgie in the yard, who was getting better at walking now. Bill called it ‘playing ghosts’ cause they couldn’t make any noise at all. Or his dad would come.

Stan didn’t think a kid should have to be a ghost in his own house. But, he wasn’t a grown up. And Bill’s dad was scary.

He always knew when they were listening to music they shouldn’t - even when Bill turned it down real low. And he didn’t help put together Georgie’s tricycle last year. He made Bill do it by himself while he just sat in the dark.

His dad couldn’t do *anything* without going back inside - that didn’t sound like a Sentinel.

Stan had said as much to Bill one day, long before he learned to trust caution over feeling, muttering as quiet as he could with a mouth full of peanut butter sandwich.

The newspaper that slapped down next to his hand startled a squeak out of him. Stan looked up from beneath his curls at a very angry Mr. Denbrough. He’d never even *seen* him angry before - he always sat with the same tapes playing and sipping scotch in the dark. His face hardly ever moved.

“A *weak* Sentinel is still a Sentinel, Stanley.” The words were like venom at the child, and Stan felt his eyes water despite himself. Bill just looked down.

Mr. Denbrough stood a long moment, staring down at Stan as the boy’s lip trembled. When he finally left the room Bill stood to grab Stan’s hand the other halves of their sandwiches before taking off out of the house.

Their legs didn’t stop until they’d reached the park. Bill didn’t like to

talk about anything important until he was sure his dad wouldn't hear. He plopped onto a bench and waited for Stan to check for dew or dirt before he sat next to him.

"He d-d-doe-do," Bill paused with an angry huff. Stan didn't move, didn't rush him. "He doesn't have a g-g-guide." Bill finally said, looking to Stan as if Stan had any idea what that meant.

"What?"

"A guide," Bill said, "They help you s-stay calm, make you b-b-better. D-Dad says it a lot."

"Why doesn't he just get one?" Stan asked. There was a tour guide for the mountains a few hours north, and another near the sea if he wanted that one instead. There was even a guidance counselor at school.

"They're p-people," Bill said, "They come to live w-w-with you, you g-get married."

"But your dad is married to your mom. He loves her?" He didn't mean for it to slip out like a question, but... they did, right?

"Sometimes," Bill said, voice as soft as if he were pretending to a ghost in his home. "B-But not really."

"Oh."

A look of confidence in something ingrained slid across Bill's face. "You d-don't love guides. Dad said so. They're... helpers. They help."

Stan didn't think he liked the sound of that. Guides were *people*, Bill said as much.

"Your dad scares me sometimes." Stan whispered.

A wide smile spread across Bill's cheeks, "I'm not gonna b-be like him." He swore, face glowing in the midday sun. "I'm never gonna scare y-you. I'll be a Sen -"

"A superhero." Stan answered before he could think better of it. Bill

looked like a superhero. Golden skin and fluttering hair and sparkling eyes.

Stan felt his cheeks pink as Bill blinked wide at him before grinning bigger than before.

“Yeah, a superhero.”

Bill handed him his sandwich and talked a mile a minute as they ate, undeterred by his stutter now that he had the freedom to speak everything he’d bottled up in his home.

Stan would follow him to the ends of the Earth.

It felt a little dramatic, looking back. A boy that was barely even a child swearing unending devotion over peanut butter sandwiches.

He’d meant it though. He’d meant it with his soul.

He never wavered, even as the world became a little darker with each day. In fact, he stood closer to Bill - his liferaft in this suddenly very clearly set system. The chaos of childhood was tapering off; no more days of just children screaming and running. No more judging by gut rather than rules.

Fresh textbooks printed each year taught about the *classifications* that had enchanted Stan only years before. They kept it light, but firm. Sentinels were strong, Leveled were normal, guides were... helpers.

Stan had thought it a typo when his workbooks didn’t capitalize ‘guide’ like the other two. It wasn’t. He’d been corrected by a bright smile from his first grade teacher; Ms. Collins.

“Guides are different, Stanley.” She said, nodding as she went, “Sentinels protect us and we need them. But, Sentinels use guides to feel better, okay?”

Ms. Collins began to write on the chalkboard, every child looking to her with rapt attention on the topic their parents always shied from.

“Guides are special and are here to help the Sentinels. Every Sentinel has a guide. If any of you are lucky enough to *be* a guide, you tell the

police or a doctor.”

Why wouldn't Stan tell his mama?

“They'll take you to meet your new Sentinel and you get to help keep the world safe!” She crowed, delighted with the very idea of it. Her pink lipstick was smeared on her white white teeth, Stan's eye twitched. “Guides can *ease* a Sentinel because they have a very tough job, it's a guide's duty to help them. Understand, Stanley?”

“That sounds scary,” Stan finally said after a heavy silence. All the kids were looking at him. He didn't like to be looked at. “What if the guide doesn't wanna go, Ms. Collins?”

Her smile suddenly looked tighter, her brow furrowed like Stan had asked something insane.

“That's not up to them, dear.” She cleared her throat and addressed the class once more, “If you ever see a guide; you *always* tell the police or a doctor. Alright, kids?”

“Yes, Ms. Collins.” The children around Stan answered dutifully. Stan couldn't speak. His tongue felt lodged in this throat. He hardly felt like he could breathe from the dark look that had glanced across his friendly teacher's face. He watched her trot to the list of the class' names; he didn't feel comfortable looking away from her.

“Now, since Stanley was so *smart* to ask,” She began, placing a gold sticker by his name with a little wink he normally preened at, “Let's talk about signs of guides. First...”

Stan tried not to hear her. Letting his shoulder curl around himself at Bill's curious gaze.

But, despite that day, the years went on and Bill kept Stan beside him like glue, tugging him through the woods to look at birds when Bill was patient enough and searching for the quarry edge when Stan was brave enough.

The day they found it felt like a revelation, like the entire world had opened beneath them for the taking. Bill was half undressed before Stan insisted they check the water first - what if there was no way

back up?

It'd been the right call. The water, though beautiful, had aggressively shallow banks of sharp rock mere feet beneath the surface. The jump was deadly if they didn't position themselves just right.

But Bill, ever determined, mapped out the rocks and divots until he knew every spot he could leap into with the freedom his bones ached for. Stan, after a few panicked breaths and a lot of tears, lept in with him. White knuckling his hand as the plummeted down into the stagnant water below.

Bill screamed every time, a battle cry into the depths. Stan just shut his eyes and waited for impact - praying he didn't hit jagged rocks even with Bill's confident navigation of the terrain below.

That tactic may have been why he never saw it coming.

They'd been twelve, the cusp of adolescence on the horizon as Bill shot up like a tree and Stan pretended his unruly curls counted for height. Bill had slammed into his room, shirt and denim shorts dirty and askew as a manic smile stretched across his lips. The blue of his eyes kept sinking beneath fluctuating pupils - like he couldn't decide how bright the room was. Stan didn't have a single light on, the only shine was the faint glow of the moon across Bill's flushed cheeks. His fingers kept twitching, unable to settle between a fist and stretching to their limits.

He was scaring Stan, just a little bit.

"It's happening," Bill said, voice cracking and hardly audible, "It's happening, it's happening."

"What is?" Stan asked, but Bill's wince made him try again in the softest whisper he could manage. "What, Bill?"

"I'm - shit - c'mon," Bill waved for Stan to follow, already taking off out of the room. Stan sat frozen for a moment, unwilling to face the this... he didn't know who that was. It didn't feel like Big Bill.

But the idea of that face coming back into his room with those eyes on him was worse than the idea of following behind it.

Stan toed on his shoes and took off after Bill.

He felt lucky, despite how unsettling all this felt, that Bill let him have time to grab his bike. Stan could barely peddle beside Bill on Silver before, but Bill was flying down the street like he was racing to beat the devil. It was only muscle memory that made them show up to the edge of the quarry unscathed.

Stan had come here in the night with Bill before. It was silent, the water hardly moved, the wind never seemed to catch the trees. They could've been in space - the stars above had always made it seem so.

But Bill wasn't calm, wasn't laying on his back to stare at the stars with his arm a steady warmth against Stan's own - he was pacing. There wasn't enough light in the rural Maine sky to show the edge of the quarry - the black water's seam along the rocky bank was indistinguishable.

"Bill," Stan finally began, voice the only sound besides Bill's frantic steps. "What's wrong?"

"Can't you hear it?" Bill asked.

"I just - I only hear you."

Stan didn't like this. Didn't like this tension in Bill that looked ready to explode. Stan wanted to reach for him, rub his temples like his mama would do when his head hurt. There was just - something was wrong.

"It's so *loud* -" Bill choked, hands cupped over his ears as his lip trembled. "Dad snoring and mom's slamming her teacup like she's trying to break it and the sheets are like sandpaper in my bed and I -" He hiccuped, curling in on himself as he shook. "It hurts."

Stan stepped towards Bill, trying to keep his feet light as he approached. Stan wanted to help him - *needed* to help him. It was like a string was pulling from his chest to Bill's own. A humming in his bones to go to him, to help him, to *ease* him -

Oh God.

The moment Stan's fingertips brushed Bill's flushed cheek it was as if the strings had been cut. Bill sank into him, legs crumbling beneath him as his nose jammed into Stan's collarbone. The wash through Stan nearly left him stumbling as well. The... God, Stan didn't have a word for it. The sense of fulfillment at helping Bill - at holding Bill and *fixing* Bill. How the tension in his face eased away, how he seemed like he could breathe again.

It took Stan too long to realize why. For the chill to settle back into his bones; he'd - he'd eased Bill. Bill was a Sentinel and Stan had calmed him. Stan couldn't do that on his own; that was impossible, only a - he couldn't. A Center could help Bill. Lock him in a room with white noise and darkness and those cotton sheets and -

But, he hadn't needed them. He'd just needed Stan.

Stan was a guide.

The terror shot through Stan, filling every inch of his being with *flightflightflight*. Stan couldn't be a guide. He silenced that hum in his bones, shoved away this - this ease in him.

Bill jerked away from him, it was as if he'd been *shot*. His face twisted back up into pain with a high keen as the touch from Stan dissipated.

Stan watched Bill's arms reach out, trembling like a lost child. Begging to be held again. Stan wrapped his arms around himself instead; shaking as he fought the pull in him to help Bill.

"W-What, Stan," Each step forward from Bill was countered with a step back from Stan. "You're - y-you're -"

"No," Stan cut him off, desperation building in his tone as Bill began to fall deeper into his own cacophony of senses. "I'm - you're a Sentinel, Bill. You're just sinking. It's okay, you just need to see a Center."

With each word Bill seemed to calm, the fear in his eyes diluting into something softer.

"S-s-s-s"

"Bill, you'll be okay. There's one in Bangor. You'll be okay, I promise," Hands brushed his forearms, Stan shot back. When did Bill get so close? *How* did he -

Stan was easing him. Even without touch, Stan was soothing him down. Oh God, oh God -

If Bill had had any uncertainty about Stan, it was gone now. His quaking fingers couldn't find purchase on Stan's pajamas as Stan backpedalled away.

"B-B-but we're compatible," Bill said, words flying out of his mouth - Stan could hardly follow as he tried to back away. "You can h-help me and I can p-p-protect you and -"

"We're not," Stan swore, tears building in his eyes, "We're *not* - Bill, please - I'm not a guide."

They'd take him away. Bill's delight wouldn't last - Stan couldn't stay with him. Bill was a loser with a stutter as much as Stan thought otherwise. He was a child. There were grown ups - adults - who needed guides and Stan was... Stronger people, older people, would take Stan away to somewhere he could help. *Help* - like he was an object for use. They'd treat him like one; he probably wouldn't get to finish middle school.

Oh God, oh *God*.

"Bill, please," He begged, but Bill's hands locked on his wrists. He tugged him in - God, he was so much bigger than Stan. So much stronger. How did Stan not realize?

"I need you," Bill said, tears building in his pained eyes. "I c-c-can't, it's so loud, everything is so *m-much*. You have to help me, they'll understand, I p-p-promise."

"You can't," Stan shook, Bill's grip forming bruises on his bird like bones, "They won't - Bill, let go. You're hurting me, *please* - "

Bill's hands shot away as if he'd burned him. Stan pulled his own shaking hands to his chest - fingers knotting into his sweatshirt as the cold sweat prickled his neck.

"You can't make me," Stan begged, voice thick with tears. "Please, Bill. I can't - don't let them take me."

Bill looked horrified with himself as he stared at Stan. He looked like the little boy who got nervous around pretty girls. The boy who hated the cold but braved it to teach Georgie to skate. The boy who carried Stan over mud and taught him the safe spots to jump into the lake below.

But his gaze began to distort. A shine building in his eyes that shook Stan to his core. Bill began to twitch again; overwhelmed with sights and sounds and smells that Stan couldn't begin to process. Stan's sneakers scrapped the soft soil dusted over the rock as he backed away.

"Stan," Bill muttered, voice cracking and terrified - face contorting into almost agony. "S-Stan help me, *helpmeStan* - p-p-p-please,"

Bill ran at him suddenly, desperate for the *ease* that Stan didn't know he'd had and didn't fucking want.

He hadn't meant to. Bill was his friend - his brother.

His superhero.

But, in that moment, Stan didn't see Big Bill Denbrough. He didn't see Georgie's big Brother or the scrappy brat who would take a punch before the bullies could get near Stan.

He saw a monster. He saw a Sentinel.

"No!" Stan shrieked as Bill came upon him, folded arms shooting out to keep him away. Stan twisted as he gripped Bill's hoodie, forcing Bill's balance from him as he shoved him back with as much strength as he could muster.

Stan didn't have strength like Bill. But, a guide's empathy could punch a Sentinel's soul.

Stan also didn't have eyesight like Bill. Stan couldn't see the edge of the cliff.

Bill stumbled once, twice, before he tipped.

Stan stood, frozen in the kicked up dirt that flew around his shins. Bill's eyes lifted into a moment of clarity, of understanding, before he disappeared.

Bill screamed. Stan shut his eyes.

The scream cut off at the gunshot impact of the water.

2. facilitat

The poster was crooked. Garish orange with pearly white letters punched across it glowed from within The Falcon's shadowbox frame. The glossy paper wasn't wide enough to fill the display and, despite Mike's best efforts, sat askew in the luster of the dusty bulb lights.

The girl on the poster was frail, timid and underfed. Her face nearly filled the entire picture. But her cheeks were rosy with adoration and her smile perfectly demure as she looked up. She was on her knees like prayer - never equal to the Sentinel who 'took care of her'. Two big muscular hands held her face as she looked up. The hands didn't cradle like a lover, or ever a friend, but gripped. She was where she belonged. Where she *deserved* to be.

Help guides come home!
REPORT ROGUES

Stan's fingers twitched on the broom he was knuckling, forcing a brow up as Mike walked over. *Indifferent, indifferent*, he chanted - *never let them see you sweat*. He slid his eyes to his manager, not even two months older than himself in a button up he always wore with cuffed sleeves and bright ties, and winced as Mike laughed.

"You look more ready to die than usual." Mike joked.

"This place really brings out the joy in me," Stan quipped, tone dry and eyes flat. He chanced a look at the poster again, unable to avoid it - they'd really made sure it was a beacon. Mike's eyes followed, a grimace forming on his face as well. "Do we need to have it right *there*?" Stan chanced.

"Direct orders," Mike said with a sigh. He didn't need to say who - *direct orders* only came from one place.

"Are you sure they couldn't find a more in-your-face spot?" Stan joked easily.

"Any more and they'd tape it to our shirts," Mike laughed again. He was always easy going, but Stan could still see the tension in his jaw.

“They came in yesterday. Picked out right where we needed to keep it to help the community.”

Sentinels had been here.

“Really?” Stan said, voice dipping as if the lobby weren’t deserted. All of their fourteen patrons were already a half hour into *Casablanca*.

“Yeah, it was a mess. They’d barely given me notice, just a call that the manager needed to be available to ‘discuss image representation’ or something.” Mike said, “They didn’t stay long; that mess yesterday was a shit show.”

Stan had tripped yesterday. The ‘booze fridge’ needed to be restocked with bottles of wine and bottom shelf liquor. But the pushcart for concessions was wobbly; Stan took one turn too sharp and slammed the edge of the counter. Stan was knocked on his ass - the bottles had exploded across the floor. Stan had cut his palm open on a rosé while Mike ran over. He’d insisted Stan go home, even though the cut was shallow - *no bleeding on ticket stubs, Stan!*

Stan’s eyes slid back to Mike, “Sorry about that.”

“It’s alright,” Mike winked, “I only keep you around cause you’re sweet on the kids anyway.”

Stan smiled at that, soft and a little crooked. Crooked like the girl in the poster. He looked to it again, feeling each vertebrae in his spine lock up once more.

“Tell you what,” Mike said, patting Stan once before walking away. He never touched for more than a moment, knew Stan was hesitant about contact. “Go man concessions for me. *Peter Pan* is at 11:00, got a lot of kids for you to delight.”

Stan nodded at Mike’s retreating back before putting the broom away and sitting at the stool behind the snack bar.

He’d known about the Sentinels. Stan listened to every call that didn’t pass through box office first - anyone who had a direct line to whoever was in charge. He was supposed to be getting the wine

anyway; he'd just grabbed a few extra bottles to overbalance the cart.

The injury had to be self inflicted, Stan wasn't lucky enough to accidentally land on a shard on his plummet down. He hated pain, but bit his lip and cut before Mike rounded the corner. It barely bled at all - Stan's pain threshold wasn't much better than a toddler - but Mike insisted he go home. Most employers would've smacked a bandaid and called it a day. Stan knew Mike wouldn't. Mike was a nice boss; a nice *man* .

Sometimes Stan felt bad about manipulating him.

'A lot of kids', as always, ended up being close to forty. Mainly toddlers clinging to their parents' coats as they ordered a diet coke with tired eyes. The theater never filled out except for Cult Clash - and that was once a month. Stan didn't work those shifts.

He liked the daytime, the quiet, the lack of people to keep track of around him. Sentinels didn't like movies - at least, not the theaters. Surround sound, giant bright screen in a dark room, the smells? No chance. The chains had adapted, special Sentinel Screenings were held to accommodate those of 'greater standards'.

They never said a Sentinel *needed* anything. They just had standards.

The Falcon didn't meet those standards. Stan could hear the movies from the lobby, nothing close to Sentinel Standard was being met. The owner hid under historical status and penny pinching; the upgrades were too costly to change the original foundations of this original cinematic experience.

It was a dingy sort of place; cult and classic movies at a discount. Too overwhelming for a Sentinel and shifts too early for almost everyone else. Perfect.

The kids were sweet, though; a sea of toddlers until winter break. Stan was patient with them, letting the parents have a moment of solace while he responded to their babbling. He felt restless as the line trickled into an empty lobby once more. Stan didn't talk to people much, toddlers were wonderful listeners; they didn't have the vocabulary to criticize yet.

The lull of customers was broken by a sudden slapping against the rounded counter edge. Stan looked up from his sweeping of stray popcorn to see the tips of small fingers as they pat against the counter. Stan leaned to look through the display case; it was a boy in a bright yellow dinosaur hoodie - little spikes and all.

The boy couldn't have been older than three, his legs wobbled as he reached for the edge of the counter. Stan couldn't stop the giggle in his throat at the soft little hands scrabbling across the marble.

"Hello!" The boy chirped, "Hello!"

Stan took mercy and bent over the counter enough to see the kid's face.

"Hi there."

"May I," The boy began before pausing. He reached up again, holding Stan's perched hand between his own. "May I please have skittle?" The kid had a lisp. Stan might die.

"Skittles?" Stan clarified with a smile.

"Skittle, please!" The boy agreed.

He said please... twice. God.

"Well," Stan began, he can't just give him candy without permission. "I'm Stan. What's your name?"

"Georgie!"

Stan froze, "What?"

"I'm Georgie," The child said, huge smile stretched wide. "Where's Bill, Stanley?"

Stan couldn't breathe, this - this kid couldn't - no *nono*

"James!" Called a deep voice. Stan whipped his head up, blinking rapidly, to see a young man jogging over to the counter.

“James?” Stan whispered.

“Me!” Yelled Geor - *James* , his name was James, “Can I have skittle, please?”

“Sorry about that,” The adult offered, lifting James up onto his hip. “He ran off. Did you bother this nice man?” He asked, bopping the boy on the nose with a wink to Stan.

“Nooo,” James whined.

“He wasn’t,” Stan promised, “He’s really sweet. Just didn’t want to offer anything without his dad’s permission.”

“Uncle, actually.” He answered easily, smile charming enough to ease the knot in Stan’s chest. “Skittles it is, I guess.”

Stan turned away from the pair, “Anything else? Popcorn? Soda?”

“Nah - hey, no. Can’t go spoiling you.” The responding whine tugged a smile out of Stan. “Gonna have to report you; only a guide whines this much!”

The smile dropped. Stan didn’t let himself take a moment before turning.

“So just the Skittles?”

The man just shook his head with a charismatic smile before putting the boy down to get his wallet. James tugged on his jacket, tears building in his eyes as he reached up with his fingers stretched.

“Up, please!” He asked, voice already wet.

The man didn’t look to him, instead swiping his card and rolling his eyes to Stan. Stan didn’t respond.

“What did I say?” He asked, keeping his voice light, “Are you gonna be a guide or are you gonna be a big boy?”

James sniffled, but didn’t say anything else. His fingers found purchase on his hood instead, tugging at the fleece spikes as

hiccuping sobs bubbled in his throat.

The man walked off to the theatre with a wink to Stan and a, "C'mon, bud." To James.

Stan looked at his retreating back and James' wobbling lip before snagging a second box of Skittles. He leaned over the counter until he could reach the big pouch on the hoodie and slid the second box in - he placed the other in James' hands. The boy looked at him with teary wonderment. Stan put a finger to his lips with a smile.

James did the same and took off after his uncle. Stan nodded to himself, pulling out his wallet to pay for the second box. Fuck that guy.

The rest of the shift dragged on as it always would. The only highlight was seeing James toddling out after his uncle, hands jammed in his pocket around his secret prize. He smiled at Stan, waving wildly as he went. Stan waved back.

Mike was finishing up a call in the office when Stan was grabbing his jacket. He tried to avoid looking at him, the call was just a woman asking about the next Cult Clash; no reason to stay and listen.

"Stan," Mike called just as Stan was reaching the door, "You doing anything tonight?"

Stan's fingers drummed across the handle, "Just gonna grab dinner."

"Would you want to join me and a friend for drinks?" Mike asked, hopeful smile that made Stan's chest ache, "It's just us, some beers - well, he likes whiskey a little too much - but it'll be fun. Nothing crazy, we'd have you home by ten. Walk you to your door and everything."

Stan laughed at that, keeping his eyes down as he fidgeted, "Sorry, Mike. I - not tonight. My girlfriend's got some Italian food calling my name, y'know?"

Mike didn't let his face drop, but Stan could see how his shoulders did. "It's okay. Raincheck?"

“Sure thing.”

“I’m almost always free,” Mike promised as he walked out the front doors with Stan, “If you ever want a friend, I’m here.”

“Gonna have to speak to HR about this. Mike, are you trying to flirt?” Stan joked just to let Mike rest a little easier. “I promise I’m good, can’t hog you all to myself - I already see you forty hours a week.”

Mike nodded, “Can I at least give you a ride home?”

“I need to get some groceries still,” Stan deflected, “Onions and garlic or something; she didn’t have time and I don’t want to put you out.”

“Alright, alright,” Mike agreed, hands up in surrender, “Enjoy your night.”

“You too.”

Stan walked home slowly, his steps measured and careful. He kept his head up, eyes straight ahead. Guides walked with their heads lowered, guides were afraid of being caught.

Stan was not a guide.

Stan had taken off from Derry with a ghost on his tail and heart crushed by stone. If he had been unremarkable before, he was *invisible* now. He wasn’t going to be a slave. He wasn’t going to be forced into life as a second class citizen because of something he didn’t ask for.

The city was the best place for him; nowhere better to hide than plain sight. Sentinels didn’t live in cities, especially unbonded ones; the effects on the senses wasn’t worth it. There was a Center, one of the biggest - easily the biggest in California, but Stan didn’t allow himself to think about it. The looming concrete tower that had entire floors without windows. It blocked out the sun in some spots - penetrating the LA skyline.

By the time Stan shouldered open his door the sun was beginning to set. He shut the door and did up the one, two, three locks along the chipped wood. He removed his jacket as he wandered to his

kitchenette.

"I'm home," Stan called, crouching at the mini fridge, staring at the barbecue sauce, carrots, and water jug before opening freezer.

"I was promised Italian," Stan sang softly, a small whistle responding, "And Italian I shall have."

The whistle in response drew a smile to his face as he placed the frozen personal lasagna into the microwave.

"Come on, dear," He said, watching the plastic tray spin, "I thought you would've missed me, Piper."

Stan turned to the cage in the corner of the room where his baby mourning dove cooed. He held up a hand with a trill and she flapped her wings, but did not take off.

"Nervous?" Stan asked, rising to cross the room and hold a hand out to her, "That's okay."

The dove trotted up his arm until nipping and tugging at the curls around his ears. He walked back to the microwave as it dinged. Grabbing his only fork, Stan carried the edge of the meal tray to his table. Sitting in his folding chair with Piper cooing in his ear - Stan turned on the news.

"Another rogue was saved today by police officers in Glendale. Their new life with a fresh start will begin as soon as they arrive to the Center."

The footage was so blurred out that Stan wondered why they bothered to use it at all. Then again, a rogue with no face made it seem like it could be anyone around you. Anyone could be an enemy of the state.

They looked male, from what Stan could see. Running for his life from police with tasers and rubber pellets. They'd taken him down eventually, who knows how brutally, but the footage always cut away to when they led them 'calmly to their new homes.'

"The officers collecting the rogue informed us that they were

detaining children illegally - but the children have seen been returned to their legal parent.”

A father, then; guides had no legal ground to be parents. No legal claim over their children once they were found out. Those kids would be watched like hawks now - he'd doomed them.

Stan had heard of people making it years without being caught, having jobs and families and just... being alive. Stan thought about that sometimes. Meeting someone, going on dates, maybe getting married... a kid.

He didn't like to think too long about it. When - *if*, not when - he did get caught it'd just be worse. All of the love and security he'd built would be torn away as he disappeared into a van. He'd never see them again. Stanley Uris would cease to be anything but a guide.

He watched the man with no face be placed in the white van with blinded windows. The footage looked like this morning, if the sun was any indication; he'd be at the Center by now.

Piper cooed on his shoulder, as if she could sense the bile rising in his throat. Stan stroked her crown as he turned the tv off.

“You're right, Pipes, you're more interesting anyway.”

Lasagna abandoned, Stan lay on his cot on the floor. Piper hopped and tittered on his chest as he laughed.

“Tell me about your day.”

The bird chirped and shook her wings.

They used to say guides and Sentinels had spirit animals, that everyone could see them; could see the kind of person they were from the moment their empathy showed like a heart on their sleeve. Talk like that stopped around the time the guides stopped being born. His grandma once said it was because all the love had died, that the souls of guides hid away and their true selves didn't show anymore. But that might have been the dementia.

Stan liked to think Piper would've been his. A little mourning dove.

She was all he needed.

A siren wailed past his window and her feathers ruffled as he tensed beneath her. Stan did not begin to breath again until the lights disappeared and his lungs burned.

He stroked along her feathers until they laid flat once more. "We're okay," He promised, "It's okay."

It wasn't him. Not today.

Stan barely dragged himself though his walk to work the next morning. The sirens the night before had not died away for hours; and the distant wailing cries took even longer. By the time sleep felt near his alarm had already begun to ring. Piper tugged at a ringlet as he kissed her goodbye before grabbing his coat.

The Falcon was as mildly dusty as he'd left it and with a quick nod to Mike he set about opening a register.

Ten in the morning was too early to start screening movies. No one had come in, maybe Stan could sneak a nap in the office before the 11:30 Peter Pan. His eyes landed on the poster again. The girl's demure face began to blur into nothing, her features distorting until she became an empty slate.

Stan felt sick again, a tightness in his chest, like his ribs were trying to part to make way for his guts to fall out.

"Scuse me?" A voice murmured, barely above a whisper.

Stan, dropping his gaze from the faceless guide, nodded in acknowledgment, "Yes, how can I help you?"

"Could I get m&m's and an icee?"

Stan poured a large and charged a small as he filled the cup.

"All we have is blue," Stan said, "Hope that's okay."

"Best flavors are colors." The man agreed. Stan snorted as he capped the treat.

The pain in his core kept building as he grabbed the candy. Shit, maybe he had an ulcer. It was sharp - he would've puked up the lasagna by now. His *bones* even ached as he bent to the shelf. Shit.

"\$5.25, please." Stan said, finally looking up to get the cash handed to him.

The boy in front of him was shaking, twitching and curling in on himself as he held out a shivering hand with two five dollar bills. God, Stan didn't have the energy to deal with a tweaker.

"Wait," The boy suddenly shouted, voice cracking at the end, "I have a quarter." The glasses perched on his nose nearly fell off and he ducked his head to search his pockets.

Stan nearly jumped out of his skin at the booming echo through the empty halls. He took the offered five and held out a palm for the change.

Good God, this guy just needed to calm *down*.

The man in front of him locked up suddenly, then collapsed into himself as if his strings had been cut. The shaking stopped nearly all together, and his hand just fell into Stan's own, quarter pressed between them.

Stan felt it then, the pain in his ribs eased as the man in front of him settled. Stan felt his eyes go as wide as the magnified ones in front of him. He looked into the face before him - spattered with freckles across nearly translucent skin slack with... ease.

Oh God.

He was a Sentinel.

3. maolú

There was no air in Stan's lungs. Frozen on an exhale, clenching in upon themselves as he stared into dilated pupils.

Just him and this - this *Sentinel* who looked a hundred pounds soaking wet despite his towering height. A vacuum sealed around them between their brushing palms.

"Wha?" The boy mumbled, scrim lifting from his eyes lazily as he tried to blink behind his coke bottle lenses. He was still sinking, if only just. Worry was beginning to seep into his irises, a pull at Stan's chest for comfort, for help, just like before. Just like with -

Stan gripped the boy's palm firmly - acting off of instinct he was never taught. Pushing towards him as he tried to keep things under control. Fingers squeezing tight enough to stop both of their trembling. The boy sunk further forward, his fringe brushing across Stan's brow. Stan could do this. Stan could get out of this.

"That's it," Stan mumbled, voice barely brushing past his own lips, smaller than a whisper, "What's your name?"

"Richie," He answered easily.

"Full name," Stan corrected, keeping his voice the same. He needed to know how to find him. How to hide from him.

"Richard Tozier," Complete vulnerability. Stan could tell him to do anything and he would. Richie's brow tightened for a moment before Stan stroked a thumb across his bony knuckles.

"Okay, Richie," Stan said, "You've got a movie to catch, right?"

"I..." He was practically dangling off the counter, curling up around Stan, "I... you,"

"Shh," Stan began to lean away, just a hair, but the boy followed him, "You're gonna miss your movie."

Richie nodded along, but he looked confused, like it wasn't adding up

in his head.

“No, I, what’s your...?”

“You’re going to miss your movie.”

All of the resistance left Richie, like that had been all he’d been worried about. The ease of Stan’s suggestion moved the other boy like a demand. Stan grabbed the icee, dripping with condensation, and slipped it into Richie’s loose grip. Stan snagged the quarter from between their palms, the circle indented across his skin.

Richie jolted a bit at the sudden cold, Sentinel rush, as he became reacquainted with his surroundings. He looked at the drink, Stan, and back to the drink.

Stan watched his mouth open on a question, his grip flexed across the plastic cup as he looked up at Stan once more.

“Sorry, do I -?”

normal I’m normal you don’t care you don’t see me

“Yes?”

Richie blinked once, twice. His eyes lost their focus, as if he couldn’t see the blonde curls two feet in front of him. He took a long sip of his drink, and wandered off to the cinema.

Stan collapsed once the doors clicked shut behind Richie. Panicked huffs of air as he desperately swallowed a scream. How did he - *what* did he do?

It was luck, pure fucking luck, that Stan didn’t panic. Shock worked in his favor. Sentinel’s couldn’t sense shock, it was an absence of sense. An absence of the complete hysteria Stan was two steps away from.

Richie Tozier had been completely eased and walked away like he’d never seen him. That, that didn’t happen. That had never happened. Rogues were caught, always caught, fuck.

Stan pulled himself to his feet, unaware of the butter seeping into his slacks as he stumbled out from behind the counter. He couldn't stay. He couldn't be here. He had to leave, skip town, something.

There was no guarantee Richie wouldn't remember in a moment. Wouldn't have the four minutes of blacked out memory seep back into his elevated senses. Wouldn't fucking, who knows - *sniff* Stan out by the skin particles left on his palm. Who the fuck knew.

Stan grabbed his jacket from the break room. Fighting with the zipper until he could feel tears well in his eyes. He needed to calm down. He was being suspicious. Suspicious meant rogue. Stan wasn't a rogue. And he wasn't about to get caught from some emaciated giant who drank blue icees.

Stan wiped his eyes furiously before making himself just breathe. In and out. Calm down. Think it through.

He couldn't just bail. He had to leave professionally. Leave properly. No reason to make Mike start calling hospitals and police stations out of a good conscious when never-late-Stan didn't show up tomorrow.

Mike was in the lobby when Stan wobbled out. Must've seen that it was unattended on the security cameras. His posture was easy as he scribbled away at his clipboard. He was humming to himself, some song Stan might've heard as a kid.

Stan cleared his throat, waiting for Mike to look up from his inventory charts. He did, and instead of a demand on where Stan had been or a reprimand on leaving inventory unattended; he smiled. The smile was soft, genuine, unguarded. Mike was a good person. Mike was a fucking good person and Stan had fucked all this up all on his own.

"I'm going to need some time off." Stan croaked, "Indefinitely."

Mike didn't move right away, eyes darting between Stan's own. Stan stared at the rumpled collar of Mike's shirt. The orange glow of the poster lurked behind Mike's shoulder.

Mike hopped up onto the counter, sitting with his elbows on his

knees to keep himself from looming too high over Stan. Stan always scolded him for that, wiping down the counter after swatting him with the cleaning rag. Mike usually did it to get a laugh out of Stan. Neither was laughing now.

“Are you okay?” Mike asked.

“Yeah,” Stan’s voice cracked out, he swallowed and tried again, “Yes. I’m okay. I just - something came up. Family thing.”

Mike knew he didn’t have any family. At least none Stan had admitted to. Stan hadn’t ever said where he was even from. No mention of a bright eyed boy or a cliff edge or hiding on a Greyhound between the seats clinging to a backpack with nothing but pictures and clothes.

Stan prayed Mike was going to be kind enough to just let him go. Just let him sink between the cracks before he was shoved out into the light and inside a cage.

But Mike, who always filled a moment with easy conversation and could loosen the knots in Stan’s spine, was silent.

Mike’s eyes flicked from Stan to stare at the corner behind him. Stan didn’t need to turn around to know.

A security camera. Angled right where Stan had stood with Richie not ten minutes before.

He finally hopped off the counter, and began to head towards the office. He didn’t take his eyes off Stan.

“Come here a second. I wanted to talk to you about something first.”

Stan’s feet didn’t move. His eyes slid over to the poster without his consent.

Spit began to clog his throat. Did Mike know? Had he reported him? Were there Sentinels on the other side of the door?

They were waiting for him, to make a spectacle of him. A poor hapless rogue was brought home, saved, by a kind hearted employer

who saw how misguided the guide had been. God, he couldn't run. They always had cameras and news teams ready. Ready to track him. Hunt him down. Blur his face into the ghost of a life to scare others into coming forward. Fuck. fuck fuck *fuck*.

Who would take care of Piper?

"Stan," Mike coaxed, eyes open and honest and filling Stan with dread, "Come on. No reason to talk out here."

Stan began to follow. Forcing his gait to remain as it may've been monitored a hundred times before. Nothing suspicious. Nothing worth reporting to a Center. Plain, boring, unremarkable Stanley Uris.

Mike's office was empty. No hulking officers in dark uniforms waiting for him. Mike wandered over to where a cassette, Christ - Mike needed to update their technology, was recording the lobby.

"Been a little short staffed here," Mike said, voice full of mirth as he thumbed across the stacked players, glancing up at the grainy blocks of their footage on the TV mounted on the wall, "My buddy's ready to kill me for showing up to the bar exhausted every night."

"You're a busy man," Stan agreed lightly, eyes flying to each corner of the room.

There were no cameras.

"That I am, that I am," Mike laughed.

Stan's throat clicked as he asked, "What did you want to talk about?"

"Was actually wondering if you wanted a promotion," Mike said, "I can't do management and projection, so you get a pay bump and we hire someone else to clean bathrooms."

"... What?"

"I know, you love the kids, but projectionist is pretty cool." Mike's expression didn't match his voice. He sounded like he was trying to pitch something fun, but his face was stern, pressing, "You sit up in

the second level, all alone in the dark with the film. I'd stay up there all day if I could."

Alone. An isolated space all for himself where no one could reach him. For eight hours a day.

"I - yeah, if you need me to." Stan kept his voice even, though he could feel the way his hands shook.

"Great! Now, we can't make it immediate, but I've got the applications ready for a few interviews. Mainly college kids. Probably will blow everything off. But, hey, you'll be hidden away from any spilled popcorn."

Mike handed Stan a crisp white page. THE FALCON printed with asinine questions Mike wasn't going to look into if Stan getting hired was any indication. All of his reference numbers had been for traditional synagogues with receptionists he knew only spoke Yiddish.

Stan stared at the form, eyes flitting blindly until landing suddenly. Uncomprehending of the small neat text stamped in the information section.

"There's a typo," Stan said, trying to breathe around the sudden stone in his throat. "You - the punctuation,"

He couldn't get the words out, didn't *want* to fix it.

Beside Classification, wedged neatly between Name and Age, with neat little boxes to check, read:

Sentinel Leveled Guide

Guide

"Huh," Mike said, squinting at the form as if he didn't see it. Mike had written it; he had to have known - what was he *doing* ?

Mike looked up at Stan. Neither blinked as Stan tried to figure out what the fuck Mike had done.

"You can't capitalize guide." Stan whispered. Not just 'don't'; you *can't*.

"My mistake." He smiled, and set the form behind him on his desk. He didn't move to correct it. "Thanks, Stan. Aw, dammit, can you - ?"

Stan looked to where Mike had popped out CAMERA 3 from the recorder and began to... drag the film out of the roll.

"These things never work," Mike complained as he tugged and stretched the footage out of the cassette, "You'd think with the historical status we'd get a break, but I guess we gotta keep everything authentic."

Stan's mouth ran dry as Mike destroyed the tape. He slid the cassette back in, and let it jam.

Mike knew. Mike *knew* and was breaking the law every second that he wasn't screaming for the Center.

Stan swallowed hard, "Sure." He turned to leave.

"Will you consider it?"

Stan paused, hand on the knob that would put him back into the Center's eye, "What?"

Mike smiled again, but his eyes looked harder, sharper, than they'd ever been. Stan almost didn't recognize him, "A drink?"

"Again with the flirting, Mike," Stan wheezed, desperate for a straight answer and terrified of getting one.

"What can I say? You're one of the best, Stan. Tomorrow. You know the spot."

Stan didn't know the spot. Mike had never once said where he went to drink with his 'buddy'.

Stan nodded.

"Sure thing."

Mike leaned across his desk to grab his own bag, rummaging through the front pocket. “Great, head home. You look like shit. That customer got handsy.”

Richie.

“Yeah, he was drunk. Said I looked like his ex.” Stan lied easily, letting it roll off his tongue.

“Figures.” Mike agreed, he tossed a pair of shades to Stan, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Stan slipped the shades on the moment he was free of the building. His eyes felt puffy and strained, God only knew how bad they must look. He walked no faster or slower than he did every day. Blending into the cracks along the broken sidewalks as he grew closer to his apartment.

The one, two, three locks slid shut. A ragged yell that had built in Stan began to force its way out and he shoved his sleeve into his locking jaw to keep from being heard through the thin walls.

It was a broken, battered cry. Tears seeped down his cheeks into the spit soaked cotton at the edges of his lips. Everything had fallen apart. From a quarter. A quarter had ruined all that he’d carefully cultivated.

Stan took a heaving breath as he tried to balance himself. He needed to pack. He needed to run. He had the prepacked duffel gripped in his fingers before he realized he didn’t know where to go.

Where could he go that they wouldn’t look now? Where could he even go with Piper? She still couldn’t fly. He couldn’t just leave her here.

Stan looked to the fridge. Three magnets for The Falcon held up a note from the landlord, an envelope of cash, and a lottery ticket.

02	53	01	21	23	+07
31	07	11	23	59	+51
12	45	49	02	34	+40
34	33	12	18	15	+52

44 23 34 31 52 +03
25 11 43 50 16 +30

It was crumpled, fraying in a corner, and lined with tape in an attempt at homemade lamination. Stan stared at it. A shout bubbling in his throat again before a soft chirp cut through the deafening static in his mind.

“Hey, hey, I’m sorry,” Stan shushed, reaching for Piper as she fluttered and twitched, “It’s okay, everything’s gonna be okay,”

Stan sat on the floor against his cot, curling around Piper as he stroked her feathers and let her nip at his chin. Exhaustion was pooling in his bones.

He needed to google Richard Tozier. He needed to find a burner phone with some data or go to a library under a fake name to do it. He needed to make sure no strings came back to him. Find out where he lived, where he worked, who he knew. What the fuck he was doing at a non-Sentinel standard establishment in the middle of the day.

Stan’s mind kept wandering back to him, despite Piper’s valiant attempt at regaining his full attention. To how he wore glasses despite having undoubtedly perfect vision, how he was so frail looking, reedy atop his long legs, how he smiled so small when Stan spoke to him.

It had... it had been so easy. To guide Ric - the Sentinel. To ease him and send him on his way. He could’ve left him like that. Sunken down in his own senses, unable to tell up from down. Sure, the Center would’ve come running, but he’d have had a hell of a head start. Mike clearly wasn’t itching to grab a phone.

But Stan hadn’t. He’d helped him without thought. As easy as breathing. The tug from deeper than his bones to guide Ri - *the Sentinel* to safety in his own thoughts. They’d been compatible.

And Stan, despite all the panic, felt better than he had in years. He didn’t feel like his skin didn’t fit, like his bones were all off in their angles, like there was space in his blood. He felt whole.

Maybe this was how it used to feel. When guides were still Guides. When Sentinels and Guides could court, flirt, hell - even fuck, before settling together. Being happy together. Completing each other.

A siren flew by Stan's window, jarring him out of his soft thoughts and nearly dislodging Piper from his wrist. He held his breath until it passed. Counting the seconds until the wail stopped fading, how many blocks away the Sentinels would be.

But it didn't pass. The shriek of red and blue lights still filled his apartment as boots slammed to the concrete. The front gate was blown open with what could only be a battering ram.

Stan didn't hesitate before throwing himself into the closet, pulling Piper in close to his chest. Jamming himself into the corner, Stan opened a plastic sealed tub across from him and pulled out a fleece blanket. It was rancid, smelling of Piper's old cage paper, beer, and aged leftovers. The smell nearly knocked Stan on his ass, and sent Piper shrilly squawking, but he tried to soothe her as he yanked it over both of them.

If it was enough to make him gag, it was enough to make a Sentinel pass out.

The footfalls came close enough that the floorboards beneath Stan rocked. He nearly bit through his lip at the stumble from just on the other side of the drywall.

"The fuck is that?" Came a gruff muffled voice.

Another voice responded, "Not our problem."

The steps continued past with a, "Fucking shit hole."

A door was slammed open. A sharp scream was cut off. Steps were slower now. A crying child echoed through the halls.

Stan held Piper closer.

They weren't there much longer. Stan heard one say the place smelled like a homeless person was squatting.

The crying continued long after Stan had gotten the courage to get out of the blanket.

Stan poked his head out, if only to seem like a concerned and mildly nosey neighbor. A guide would keep hiding. Stan had nothing to be afraid of. Stan wasn't a guide.

The unit was three down from his own. He could see scuff marks across the floor. A family portrait was shattered on the floor next to the welcome mat. They hadn't bothered to shut the door. It'd been slammed off its hinges.

Stan quietly shut his door. Sliding his one, two, three locks into place. Then doing it again. And again. Knuckling the brass so tight his fingers went white. Shoving the lock shut, undoing, and once more. Stuck securing his unstable fortress. How many locks had they had on their door? How many deadbolts to protect their children?

Piper tugged at a curl by his ear. Stan let go of the locks. He went to the bathroom and made a small puddle of water in the sink for her to clean herself. As she preened, he yanked the shower handle and stepped in mindlessly. It was scalding hot. Stan scrubbed at his hair.

This world wasn't soft. There was no room for compatibility beyond assigning a guide to a Sentinel. Stan had no place for Bill Denbroughs or Richie Toziers.

Stan scrubbed until his scalp stung. He rubbed soap across himself once, twice, three times.

He had to be clean for work tomorrow. It would be suspicious not to go.

Notes for the Chapter:

shit, my dudes. sorry that took so long.

please leave a comment! lemme know what you think is happening, what you think is gonna happen, if it sucks.

4. gemak

Richard Tozier did not stay away.

Stan had googled him, and nearly spit his stouffers macaroni across the room. Piper didn't appreciate it.

Richie Tozier: Breakout Star of Saturday Night Live!

CBS Pilot in the Works: Richie Tozier to Play Leading Man

Richie Tozier Leaves SNL after ONE SEASON - What We Know

The articles seemed endless. An internet sensation for his standup and youtube videos; he booked a few small TV roles and eventually auditioned for SNL with apparently great success. Los Angeles had enough actors for Stan to have seen a few on the street and had enough streets shut down for filming that he'd nearly been late to work.

There were photos of him without glasses in magazines in clothes that cost more than Stan's apartment. Interviews on talk shows and vlogs with other cast members. 2017 had been the fucking year of him.

Stan read all of them, every regurgitation of how he was a charmer and self deprecating and didn't know how to cook and bisexual and his favorite color was orange. The articles dropped off in May, after he'd announced he was leaving SNL and wasn't picking up the CBS comedy. People suspected drug use. A young star who shot to fame and couldn't handle the expectations?

Or a Sentinel who couldn't handle the strain without a guide.

But none of the articles or wiki pages or *anything* said a word beyond Leveled. There was no question about it. He was thin and wore glasses. Sentinels had a golden standard of 20/20 vision. Fan accounts fantaized him as a Sentinel, how big and strong he'd be and he'd ravage them in a fit of sensory passion after being blindsided by their beauty. Stan closed those out quickly.

Richie had moved to LA recently, and was rumored to be working on

some new project. But the drug accusations clung to him with each new sighting of his rapid decline. TMZ followed him like a hawk before saying that he wasn't worth trailing until the inevitable overdose story.

He looked so tired in all the pictures. An exhaustion down through his bones.

Stan practically looked like a mirror image after he stayed up the entire night reading about him. It had been to gather information. Purely to make sure he never walked his route on the way to and from work, if he needed to change grocery stores. Clearly he fucking didn't, Richie lived across the valley. Stan worked near downtown, the commute would be killer. How he'd ended up at a shitty rundown non-Sentinel theatre on the other side of town was a fluke.

But, right before Little Miss Sunshine was set to screen, a tall, sick looking, SNL alumni walked through the doors.

Stan could hide from him. He'd done it well enough the first time. And the boy looked so out of it it was like he didn't even know where he was.

Stan didn't greet him, didn't want to draw attention to himself at all, and stood frozen until Richie mumbled, "Could I get m&m's and an icee?"

"We only have blue." Stan said quickly, knowing he'd be alright with it.

"Best flavors are colors," Richie snorted. Stan watched him pause, blink, and blink again. They'd had this conversation before. With any luck Richie just felt like he was having dejavu.

"\$5.25,"

Richie didn't move for a long moment. Only his eyes dragged around in their sockets, like he couldn't get them to process as fast as he wanted. He looked almost scared, wired.

Stan felt a tug in his ribs at the expression on Richie's face. He ignored it. Fiercely.

Richie fumbled with his wallet and held out six dollars with a trembling hand. Stan didn't raise his own to take it. Richie awkwardly set the bills atop the counter. Stan rang it up quickly and slid the change across the laminate coating with the candy and drink.

The cold seemed to shoot up Richie's arm as he grabbed the cup, and for a second his eyes looked clear. Too clear, too clear, as he looked around him again. Stan's jaw locked when the brown eyes landed on him.

Richie blinked. Stan stopped breathing.

"Sorry, do I kn-"

"You're going to miss your movie." Stan said, firm and coaxing. The words held the same lilt as the day before. And Richie's eyes hazed over just the same. Like just Stan directly addressing him had soothed the ache in him. Stan's ribs felt lighter. He wanted to break them.

"Yeah," Richie's throat clicked, eyes still on Stan even as his head turned away.

normal

"I'm sorry," Richie began again, god, his voice was so much softer than the interviews, "Have-"

normal i'm normal you don't see me

He blinked rapidly, seeming to clear dust from his eyes as he tried to gather his words.

normalnormali'mnormal

"You look-"

likenothing you don't knowmenormalNORMAL NORMAL

Richie froze completely. For a second, Stan was worried he'd killed him.

Then he blinked, slowly, and walked into the theatre.

Stan's ribs ached. He punched them.

The new girl who replaced Stan on the floor was, admittedly, much better at the job. She didn't hide from Richie when he came in every fucking day. The first time she stood beside Stan he ducked behind the counter like a goddamn idiot. There were people from the Center everywhere the second *rumors of sensitivity* started. Mike could've destroyed that tape, but Sentinels had been here for the poster the day before. What if they were on to him?

Stan chanced a look at Beverly and was greeted with a knowing smile. Oh God. Oh God, *ohfuck*.

But she just winked and tapped the toe of her boot against his hip.

She recognized Richie immediately, but was as courteous as Stan had trained her to be. Richie was a spacey as ever, if not worse. Stan couldn't take looking at him like that. It wasn't until she was crouching next to him that he realized Richie had trailed away from the concessions stand and into his movie.

"Someone's got a crush, huh?"

She thought he was a fanboy. A complete dork who hid from his crush. Good. Stan could work with that.

She was funny as anything, with BEV scrawled neatly across her name tag. She even put two little hearts next to it. She had a cigarette behind her ear and eyeliner smudged just so. Stan had trained her, and found her easy enough to talk to after her acceptance of his inability to face Richie.

"So, when is it ethically acceptable to spit in a soda?"

"If they hit on you." Stan answered without missing a beat. She let out a sharp laugh, her eyes bright like childhood.

“Well, then I’ll just have you kick their ass, Stan,”

“Oh, sure,” Stan agreed, “I’ll lay them out for you.”

She squeezed his shoulder with her tongue poking through her smile, “Thanks, babe.” Beverly only touched with a firm grip. She didn’t brush or let you wonder where she might go. Everything was intentional and visible. Stan knew that was a learned habit. He didn’t lean into the touch, but he didn’t move away either. Bev was nice, but Stan wasn’t going to be seeing much of her after today.

Stan knew she was a friend of Mike’s; he’d never actually had anyone come in for interviews beyond Beverly Marsh throwing her boots up onto the arm on her chair and saying, “I’m sure you’re wondering why I’ve called you here today.” She was filling out paperwork within ten minutes.

Stan wondered if she was the friend Mike was always talking about. Mike had used male pronouns since the first offer; but there was no way to know if that was a cover. Mike never said his friend’s name. He mentioned he liked whiskey - ever mindful of how Stan didn’t seem to imbibe in any vices - but no age or name or anything to distinguish him in a crowd. He was just a standing invitation for drinks at an undisclosed location. Beverly looked like she could hold her liquor, Stan half thought she might have some in her thermos under the register.

It had almost come off his tongue a few times, between her fits of teasing giggles and winks. The quiet offering of trust that Stan didn’t have in his marrow anymore. The reach to the girl with fire for hair about what the fuck was going on anymore.

If Beverly saw the tension in Stan’s shoulders, she never said anything. Which, in a way, was worse. He could lie his way out of nearly anything. But he didn’t know how to handle someone who was better at it.

Beverly Marsh was a friend of Mike Hanlon. And Mike Hanlon knew what had happened with Richard Tozier. Stan wanted to like them both, God - he did - but something about *everything* about them felt off. Anxiety was sharpening to paranoia like a wire wrapping against

Stan's throat. Mike had information on him. He'd destroyed the tape, sure, but all it took was a murmur for him to send Stan to a Center. To see Stan's blurred face dragged from the Falcon on the news that night.

Stan liked Mike. But he couldn't trust him anymore.

And Stan didn't have enough of a spine to try and fix it. Mike was the closest thing to a friend Stan had in the entire city, sans Piper. And the day Mike handed him the key to the deadbolt on the projection room, he'd said, "It's the only key," With what felt too close to hurt in his eyes.

"That's a terrible design flaw," Stan answered.

"Yeah, well," Mike laughed, "Good thing I trust you."

Stan didn't deserve it. But neither of them said anything.

Stan had worked at The Falcon longer than he'd ever planned, but he'd never seen the room, much less the door. The place had been owned by spies, Mike would say, communists who would hide sympathizers during the witch hunt. The projection room was built with a hidden door to keep them safe.

Stan had always assumed it was bullshit, a story to try and get him to smile, but the door was flush to the wood paneled walls, no handle, but a harsh push and the panel jarred enough in to slide on a track.

"I'm only showing you the entrance once," Mike said, gravely serious, "I'm gonna laugh my ass off watching you shove the walls trying to remember tomorrow."

"Such a courteous employer," Stan said, more relieved than he should've been at Mike's snort.

The door had a code, 62683, which Mike was merciful enough to write down for him, before turning the lock and revealing a small staircase. The door clicked behind them, but the stairs seemed to lead nowhere - rising until there were flush to the inky ceiling above.

"Well," Stan hummed, "I guess this is the part where you kill me."

“Later,” Mike agreed.

Despite all of it, Stan wasn't *afraid* of Mike. And he followed blindly in the dark up the stairs to nowhere. Stan was broken and paranoid and but not of Mike himself. He simply had too many ties to the end of Stan. Too many variables to make him disappear if he wasn't careful. Mike didn't have a cruel bone in his body. He might have too many self sacrificing ones, though. The selfless didn't get far anymore.

The stairs to nowhere went to a hatch in the ceiling, there was no lock on it, but Mike had to give it a good shove to punch it open. Stan climbed the last of the steps, and entered the projection room.

The room was as sparse as his apartment with only a stool and a bookcase full of reels. He'd said as much when Mike had showed him. The manager had laughed, and said he'd bring Stan a quiche if he could ever be bothered to tell him where he lived. Stan said that his information was all on his employment form, but he was suspecting Mike knew that he'd listed his neighbor's unit number.

The projection room was a scrim of dust floating through cold space. Blinding beams of light cut through the fog that surrounded Stan. The *clickclickclick* of the films whirlwind buzzing beside his ear was his only conversation.

He could hear Beverly and Mike laughing before the whir of the projectors filled his empty space. Could hear the way she always dinged her hip on the counter despite Stan pointing out the edge every time he had been down there. How Mike fussed over her and she waved him off with a laugh. Stan swallowed around the lump in his throat.

It was better up here. Stan was safe up here. Mike had given him a fortress on a greened metal keyring. Stan was safe and alone and didn't need to keep a wall to his back anymore. He put his stool on the floor hatch and kept the world out. Isolated in a vacuum with only flickering pictures to watch him.

This was the perfect situation. The room was guarded with numerical code and deadbolts and fireproof doors. The only windows weren't

large enough to jam his shoulders through, much less anyone else. He sat above the bustle of the small Falcon crowds.

clickclickclick

Alone on his stool in the dark.

“He asks about you,”

Stan startled off of his stool, head whipping around the room from his perch. The house lights were on in the left wing, no one had shown up for Yogi Bear. Mike seemed to be the only soul with nostalgia for that disaster of a movie. Stan dragged the stool over to the window and leaned up to the glass to find one Miss Marsh sitting on a headrest, her legs swung atop the armrests of the next aisle. It was like she didn't know how a chair worked.

“What?” Stan called, sliding the glass aside.

“Richie Tozier,” She clarified, “He asks about you.”

Stan didn't know how to respond to that. Richie, as far as he'd assured, didn't know who he was. How could he ask for a boy he didn't see?

He settled on, “*What?*”

Beverly just snickered, heels tapping against velvet seats, “He doesn't know your name, but he asks. Goes all dazed and confused and asks where the other person is.” She pulled the cigarette from behind her ear and twirled it between her fingers. “It's weird, y'know, I didn't believe the drug hype about him. He's not on anything I've ever seen.”

Stan watched her look up at him, really stare at him. He wanted her to look away.

She did, a moment later, with another laugh, "Then again, maybe there are rich people drugs we can only dream about."

"Yeah, maybe," Stan agreed quietly.

"I miss you, Stanley," She called, and reached her fingers out for him, "Grab my hand."

Stan half heartedly waved his arm through the window, "Can't quite reach. So close though,"

"Throw down your curls then. I'm sure they stretch to Rapunzel specifications."

"You've figured me out," He lamented, "The jig is up."

"Pretty sure you're the only kid I can't figure out, Mister Uris."

Stan's witty remarks halted at that. His tongue stuck behind his teeth and the unprompted sincerity, "I'm older than you." He finally muttered.

"Yet I'm so much wiser," Beverly hopped up to stand on the armrests, precariously balanced as she reached dramatically once more, "Let me in your tower, it's so hard to make fun of you from here."

"I don't know, you're really killing it so far," Stan thought about the code and the lock and the stairs to a door he could stand on.

"Please?" She drew the word out into a long keen, looking delighted at Stan's eye roll.

"Oh, c'mon, you never say please. Now I know you're trying to kill me." He made to shut the glass, just to see her shout indignantly.

"As if I could hurt a face that cute."

"This is workplace harassment." Stan pointed out, eyebrows furrowing suspiciously, "I'm gonna tell Mike."

Beverly was not impressed, wagging her cigarette at him like an annoyed school teacher. He wondered if she ever actually smoked it,

or if it was just for her image. Maybe both, “He invites you to drinks every night, pretty sure he’s in love with you.”

Beverly knew about the drinks.

Stan chanced, “Would you be there?”

She waved him down again, “If you want a date you have to ask at my elevation level.”

“You mean I’d have to squat?”

“Watch it, Uris, I’m at perfect knee kicking height,”

“More like knee punching-”

Beverly clutched her chest, “*Rude*,” Their rhythm lulled for a moment. Stan could see her thinking through her next words, “I could be there too, yeah. A little quartet. We could sing in matching vests.”

Beverly wasn’t the friend. So there was a third, unaccounted person who knew about Mike and Stan and Beverly and possibly Richie by association. Stan didn’t say anything to that. Beverly watched him for what must’ve been long enough to lose hope at continuing their conversation. He watched her hop off the armrests, and tuck her cigarette back behind her ear.

Stan blurted out, “How do you know he isn’t asking for Mike?”

Beverly looked back up to him, eyebrows cocked, “Hm?”

“Richie Tozier,” He began, he wished he hadn’t - but the words had shot out of him, “Mike works here too. Amazingly the building isn’t run by three people alone.”

“But we’re the only morning shift,” Beverly corrected, hands dug into her pockets, “And he’s been edgy since you stopped hiding behind the candy bars.”

“He didn’t even know I was back there.”

Beverly didn't say anything. Her stare cut through Stanley, right into his core. Her childhood eyes were blinding bright in the cheap fluorescent lights. She took her hands out of her pockets and faced him directly; posture open and vulnerable. Stan's shoulders shrunk in despite himself. She smiled something soft, and spoke even softer, "Let me up there, Stanley. We can talk."

Stan didn't hold her gaze, couldn't look at her sweet face and weighted offering, "I have to set up the next showing." He didn't want to talk. Didn't need to talk. Couldn't talk.

"... Sure thing, babe." Beverly let off easy enough, the tension in Stan's jaw must've been evident even from there. But, just before Stan could slide the glass shut, lock himself away once more, she said, "Drinks tonight?"

It was the first time she herself had offered. Stan looked at her, really looked, and smiled a crooked wobble.

"Maybe."

He slid the glass shut.

Notes for the Chapter:

bev is here oh wow

what do you think is gonna happen? what do you
hope happens? does any of it make sense?

5. lethed

Stan had never seen a guide taken. He watched the news avidly, tracking and marking all locations where rogues were being spotted, a flurry of thumbtacks into a map of all the neighborhoods. There did look to be any pattern, any system, just a witch hunt. The closest call had been a few weeks before, hiding in his closet with Piper under a scrim of filth. He had a strategy for his home, his territory, smells he could drop and noises he could make; everything designed to deter a Sentinel's approach. But he'd never *seen* what they do.

Maybe it was the projection room with all the locks, or Beverly's attempts at friendship, or Mike's risky offerings of trust. Maybe it was all of it. But Stan hadn't anticipated facing a 'rescue' in person.

It'd been early enough in the day that Stan clutched an obnoxiously large thermos of tea. The weather was rough, heavy wind and a dry cold that made him wrap up in a sweater and oversized jacket. Beverly had laughed when she saw him stumbling his way through unlocking the front door for her.

"You look like a little Russian doll,"

"Yeah," Stan mumbled, half asleep, "I open up to more depression."

Beverly snorted, "That's hot." And held the door for him.

Stan turned to her, too tired to make a proper snapback, but hoping whatever nonsense spilled out was enough to make her snort again. But the smile on Beverly's face had turned to shock, a soft shock, her face almost slack as her eyes widened. She was looking just over Stan's shoulder, and he began to twist to follow her gaze. He'd hardly shifted his feet before a body barreled into his own.

Hot tea exploded across linoleum floors, scalding Stan's hands and face. His head *whapped* against the tiles, and a burst of color sprung across his vision as the girl on top of him scrambled to regain her footing.

Her elbow dug into his chest sharply, but Stan was too taken with the

raw panic in her eyes. A flightless bird caught in a snare. She must've been running full speed when she's collided with Stan, but her limbs seemed locked, like her sudden stop in momentum left her frozen. Unable to make a decision with too many variables at play.

"Stop!"

The girl snapped back into her own skin, and took off, tripping over Stan as she went. Stan only just avoided a sudden horde of trampling boots by the grace of Beverly, who'd dragged him by his sweater with a violent tug. He skidded across the floor and into her arms, propped against her crouched form as four, six, ten tactical suited *giants* rushed the girl. A more petite woman, blonde, watched as the girl was surrounded.

The girl who ran into Stan couldn't have been older than twenty. Her hair was dark and cropped to her chin with curls that stuck to her ruddy cheeks. She wore a soft dress with a tea soaked hem. She was bawling as she backed up.

The men and women flanking her seemed restless, agitated, and one had slight limp. He fell out of formation, for only a moment, but a gap had opened in the sea of body armor. Stan and the girl saw it at the same time. Her eyes met his own as she threw herself forward. She was small, smaller than Beverly. She got just past the flock, and Stan saw a desperate hope in her eyes, when a stun baton dug into her side.

She shrieked, and collapsed in on herself. Her body spasming at the current circulating through her. The man pressed it against her again, violently jammed against her calf; the same leg he was limping from. Beverly clung tighter to his clothes, like he was going to run at them, like he wasn't frozen to his core.

The girl looked at Stan again. Bloodshot eyes glossy with tears as she brokenly choked, "Help me..."

The uniformed woman walked to stand over her. She pulled her walkie talkie to her mouth, looking nearly bored now that the brunette girl was weeping on the ground, and began to drone, "Officer Gretta Keene. Rogue Collection Division, proceeding

containment of Betty Ripsom, age seventeen.” She reached into a pocket on her belt, and pulled out a handful of metal links, solid with a slight curve to each piece. She began to snap the pieces together.

“H-help me,” Betty begged.

“You have been hiding your biological status as a guide.”

“Please, *please*,” Her hand wobbled across the tea soaked floor as she reached for Stan and Beverly.

“Rogues are an enemy of the state and -”

“*Help me* - ” Gretta jutted her chin and the baton was against Betty’s neck, she choked on a shriek.

“As such,” Gretta continued, annoyed she’d been cut off at all, “Not tolerated. You will be brought to the Downtown Los Angeles Guide Rehabilitation Center for treatment and education to properly serve your country.”

The links, now eight dangling down, went around Betty Ripsom’s neck. Gretta squeezed, and the two free ends met to close into an endless chain. A collar. Betty’s throat clicked beneath it. It was too tight. Gretta stood upright once more, and pushed a bump in the glove of her right hand. The collar lit up. Betty screamed.

Gretta had a ghost of a smile as she pulled her walkie to her mouth once more.

“Rogue contained.”

Stan watched them grab Betty’s arms, grips leaving the skin of her biceps white with pressure. She couldn’t have weight a hundred pounds soaking wet, but they treated her like a wild animal. She was still awake, horribly awake, as they forced her feet under her. The blurred face of her on the news wouldn’t just be to hide her identity. It hid the shock collar.

“Huggins! Criss!” Gretta snapped, and the men holding Betty shot upright, jarring her to stand on the tips of her toes. Neither paid her any mind, “Get her in the van.”

“Yes ma’am.” The two men answered. They dragged Betty through the doors of The Falcon. She was still quietly, so quietly, whispering for help.

Gretta Keene’s boots came to a stop in front of the crouched Beverly and collapsed Stan. She said, “The Center will take care of the door. Do either of you require medical attention?”

Stan blinked, and looked at the still open door. The glass was splintered, whether from smacking the wall or Stan’s back hitting it; he wasn’t sure. His spine bloomed a pain something fierce. He stared at the door as his tongue stuck to his teeth.

“No,” Beverly answered, voice smooth, “We’re fine. Thank you.”

Gretta nodded, but didn’t follow her squad members. Her knees clicked as she crouched in front of Stan. Her eyes were huge, a swamp green that felt cold and empty, “Are you alright?”

No, Stan thought, he wasn’t alright at all. But he nodded in what he prayed was a natural manner.

“Cheer up, kid,” She snapped, a dishonest smile smeared across her cheeks, “You just saved a Sentinel.”

Stan had been in her way. She was running and Stan had been in her way. She was caught because Stan had been there when she would have run into The Falcon and hid and -

“What’s your name?” Gretta asked, snapping Stan out of the clawing panic in his throat. But he couldn’t find his words, she was too close, she was a Sentinel and too fucking close to him and she needed to

g e t a w a y

Gretta’s knees creaked as she lost her footing, tipping off kilter and dropping one knee to the floor to keep from completely eating it in a puddle of lukewarm tea. Her big eyes were hauntingly large, blinking with pupils dilating in rapid flutters. Her hand clutched her chest, like she could hold her heart beneath kevlar.

Stan watched her rotate, getting to move, before her foot splashed

the edge of the puddle. She froze, eyes darting to the rippling echoes, laser focus, before slowly moving her swampy irises back to Stan. She didn't leave, didn't fold under like Richie and Bill had. They weren't compatible.

Beverly pulled him minutely closer against her breast, but Gretta's hyper focus caught the action. Her brows rose, chest puffed, and she leaned in close, *toofuckingclose* to Stan once more.

"What's -"

get away

"Your-"

get away go away go away die

"Name?"

you're going to kill betty she'll never make it in there get away from me

get away from ME DI E D I E D I E

Gretta stopped breathing.

"She's sinking!" Beverly yelled, yanking Stan's gaze away from the pinpoint pupils of Officer Keene. His vision pooled into a foggy haze of overwashed flannel, painted nails digging into his scalp. His side was flush against her, breathing stifled with cotton smushed to his nose.

Boots came flying back into building. Beverly, with tears in her throat, rushed, "She looked at the puddle for a long time and my boot dragged on the floor and squeaked and she just honed in on it. She's stuck - "

Beverly couldn't spit out another word before a vial was jammed into Gretta's nostrils, the effect was instantaneous. Smelling salts. Old school recipes still worked. Stan didn't look up from Beverly's shirt, let her cry and panic for the officer as they escorted her out. With a commanding Sentinel under, they wouldn't look twice at the two movie theatre employees. They didn't move until the tires sped off,

Gretta and Betty inside.

Stan felt Beverly twist her leg from under him, and kick the door shut. The glass shattered to the floor.

“Well... shit.” Beverly mumbled.

Stan looked up to see her face, and found nothing. No emotion at all. Tear tracks cut through her foundations and left scrawls of mascara. But her breathing was smooth and even. Her face almost serene.

Stan had at least half a foot on her, so he didn't make her try to lift them both. His cheeks and nose stung from where tea had splattered, and he couldn't get his fingers to stop trembling.

Bev yanked her cigarette from her ear and lit it. Blowing the smoke out the shattered door, she said, “Do we have anything to tape this shut?”

Stan nodded, but didn't move. Beverly took drag after drag, until barely a butt was left, and flicked the ashes out the hole. She moved around Stan, pillaging the box office desk and coming back with painter's tape and old movie posters. Stan watched her jam *Caddyshack* and *Howl's Moving Castle* over the gaping maw of the door until the wind didn't bite his skin anymore.

“C'mon,” Beverly coaxed, middle finger and thumb linking around Stan's wrist. Linking shut, like the collar around Betty's throat, too tight, *tootight* -

Beverly stepped back as Stan jerked away. He clutched his wrist to his chest, eyes searching her's for something he wasn't sure of yet. Beverly kept her palms up and open, making no move to touch him again.

She spoke, “If you're gonna cry you can't do it here,” Her eyes slid to the glass wall, exposing them to the street, “C'mon, Stan.”

He followed after her, slowly, to the office.

“It was my fault,”

“That cunt had it coming,” Beverly snapped, digging in her pockets until she yanked out a carton of Marlboros, “Not the best timing, but,” she shrugged her shoulders as she lit another cigarette. The lighter’s glow was vivid across her freckled skin. Her thumb fell off the plastic trigger and it was out in a moment. A light, snuffed out of existence, like it was never even there.

Betty Ripsom had been snuffed away. Written out of her own life the second a collar had clicked shut. A little light trying to get away until she slammed into a movie theatre employee.

“She could’ve gotten away,”

Beverly looked at Stan, brow furrowed, “What?”

The words didn’t come right away, catching on the lump that had sprung inside Stan’s throat. His molars clenched against one another as he tried to make the words form. They tripped out of his mouth in a thick voice, wet with guilt, “I tripped her, it was my fault, they’re gonna kill her she - “

“That wasn’t your fault,” Beverly cut in, stepping close to Stan.

Stan shook his head, curls whipping around his clouding peripherals, “She could’ve - “

“She never would’ve made it.” Beverly cradled Stan’s face in her hands, “It was over the second she got caught. There’s nowhere she could’ve run to.”

Stan sobbed for what could’ve been minutes or an hour. Air rattling in his chest, lower lip quivering as he hiccuped for air. Beverly’s ringed thumbs stroking along his cheeks, smearing the tears across his flushed skin. She didn’t speak, didn’t joke, just let him cry.

Stan hadn’t cried when Bill... when he last went to the quarry. He’d stood there with his eyes clenched shut until the sun peaked above the tree lined horizon. It might’ve been shock, that’s what they’d said when they found him, but Stanley hadn’t felt anything. A complete absence of connection to what had happened to his only friend.

He felt a lot for Betty Ripsom though. He felt too much, feelings

clawing up his throat and prickling in his eyes. He wanted to scream, yell, something, but it all was too much. He didn't know why he was crying like a child for a girl he didn't know. She'd been in and out of his life in minutes. Why he would cry for a stranger and become a shell for Bill.

But she wasn't a stranger, not really. She was an omen. Betty Ripsom was what Stanley could become in an instant. He'd seen himself in her. She'd had an entire life before Stan had come between her and freedom that she'd never really have. Stan would never have it either.

He sniffled, nose clogged, and tried to put himself back together. They should call Mike, let him know what happened. Beverly pat his cheek, and Stan blinked until he could see her clearly. She was so adaptable, didn't flinch once during any of that. Even when Stan...

Stan stilled.

"What did you mean?"

"About what, Stanley?" She asked, voice soothing.

"She deserved it - Gretta, how did you - "

"C'mon, Stan." She sighed. Her eyes were kind, but tired. Stan's throat clicked.

She knew; Stan had feared she might, but there was no doubt now. Beverly had watched him nearly kill someone. He *would've* killed them if Beverly hadn't stepped in. She'd saved him; if the officers had seen any of it Stan would've been locked up in that van in a second.

For a split second he tried to ease her, a desperate hope that she was a Sentinel; that he wasn't just caught from not being careful enough.

you don't know me

He begged, brow pinching as her looked into her light eyes.

i'm no one you don't know me forget me forgetforg

"That doesn't work on me, Stanley," She hummed, and a crooked

smile danced around her cigarette, "Just plain ol' Bevvie. Nothing special." She smushed his cheeks with a wink.

"*That's* not true," Stan mumbled, heart aching that she'd even imply it.

Beverly might have been the bravest person Stan had ever met. That or the stupidest. Maybe both. They could've arrested her, even killed her, if they felt she was withholding the retrieval of a guide. Aiding an enemy of the state. The cigarette dangled loosely between her lips, embers fading as she watched Stan watch her. He knew she was waiting for him to decide what to do, how to react; if he'd run. If he'd lock up and shut down and pretend none of this was happening.

He didn't run, just pinched his mouth tight and waited for her to decide what happened now.

"I could use a drink," Beverly decided, "I don't think my coffee's gonna cut it."

"There's no bars open." It wasn't even nine yet.

"That's what the roof's for," She answered, "We can paint the town red after we're good and toasted."

She led them both outside, but took the emergency exit through the theatre. Stan was grateful, he didn't want to see the spill of glass and tea again. Beverly still had her bag on her shoulder, and secured it before climbing an almost concerningly rusty fire escape ladder. Stan's sneakers slid on the rungs, each step cautious as he followed the recklessly quick pace of Beverly. She nearly slipped off twice. Maybe she *was* just stupid. Stan didn't think so though.

Stan, admittedly, had never been to The Falcon's roof. The idea of whatever smog covered debris settling on the building wasn't even a little bit appealing. But something about Beverly's brash lead allowed Stan not to think about it. Or maybe he was in shock from earlier. He'd like to think it was Bev.

It was exactly what he'd anticipated, save for three folding chairs jammed behind the air conditioning unit. Beverly yanked two out

from the crevice and shook them until they opened. She plopped into one and gestured for Stan to do the same. He sat, and watched with a bemused look as she rifled through her bag.

“Oh my God,” Stan laughed as she pulled out her thermos, “Do you actually have booze in there?”

“Stanley, these accusations are cruel and unfounded,” She lamented, clutching her thermos to her chest as her other hand brought out a bottle of Jack Honey, “I keep my booze in my purse like a fucking lady.”

She handed the bottle to Stan and popped the thermos lid open. Quickly chugging down coffee that was, “Fuck - hot - shit,” she made room to pour in a solid handful of fingers of whiskey. Stan handed the thermos back after she’d put the bottle away and watched her cap and shake the thermos, crudely mixing the alcohol and caffeine.

Beverly screwed the cap off again, and filled the removable cup to the brim. She handed it to Stan and took a swig of her own from the canister. They sat in silence, the space between them softening to what it had been before this morning, but stronger after the chaos of it.

Beverly could turn him in, Stan knew that, but she hadn’t. She had risked her own life for him. Stan wondered if his parents would’ve done the same. If he hadn’t blended so well into the wallpaper. He thought they loved him well enough, but love wasn’t supposed to be part of it. Good parents will tell the Center that their child may be a guide. A good parent cares about the future of *all* the children, not just their own.

And she had been right earlier, he was a dead man the moment someone knew. She already knew. Stan would have to settle for being a dead man walking; but he didn’t think Beverly would nail his casket shut. Not after all that. Trusting her wouldn’t hurt him more now than fighting it.

Stan figured he could have a friend once more in his life.

“It took me awhile,” Beverly said, voice soft between them, “To

realize how bad the world was. I grew up poor, rough area, bad..." She paused, taking a long drink. She didn't wince at the burn, "Bad parents. But I didn't really *get* how the world was until I was out in it on my own. My whole family was normal,"

She stopped herself, eyes darting to Stan at her choice of words, "Normal," Stan agreed, "That's the best word for it."

"Yeah, normal... so I didn't realize what it was like for everyone else. Even once I was on my own I was surrounded by friends and work and parties and I thought being an adult was the greatest thing in the world. Like no one could hurt me again because I wasn't gonna let them anymore. Like everyone had the opportunity to make something of themselves.

"No one who isn't a guide sees what it's like. What it's really like. No one is scared of going outside or of being taken. We all are living pretty happy normal lives at the... the *expense* of guides. Because we don't want to see them as people. We've allowed ourselves to not see them at all. We put them in a prison that blocks out the goddamn sun!" She didn't need to elaborate on that; and blocking the sun was just barely an exaggeration.

The Center cut through the Los Angeles skyline. Completely unavoidable to the eye, poking above the tops of skyscrapers. No one *called* it a prison. It was a rehabilitation center; by all claims and accounts. A safe haven for new Sentinels who needs an adjustment period to really control all of their incredible gifts. It had rooms specially built to meet Sentinel standards, education on how to hone their senses, and a placement program for getting their own brand new shiny guide.

The tower was made up of three segments. The first ten floors were all glass panelling, lush, open and inviting for all the scared kids ready to embark on their birthright of greatness. The top floors were where the Sentinels trained. Pamphlets scattered across the city boasted military training and tranquil sensory deprivation tanks. No expense was spared to breed the next great generation of leaders.

The middle floors had no windows; guides were a flight risk - especially from twenty stories high. There wasn't much information,

if any, at what exactly was up there. Sparse pamphlets with serene and content guides were given to parents when black vans came to take their kids. How they would be prepared and safe and helpful. It was an *honor* to be dragged from your room before you know what's going on.

"I can't stand it, I can't fucking stand it, Stanley. We've made a hell for people just because we were told it was the right thing to do." She scrubbed a hand across her eyes, and Stan almost wanted to hold her face like she'd done for him. He let the toe of his sneaker tap her boot. She laughed wetly, "Fuck, I don't know. I'll never know. That's the whole point."

"No one does," Stan said, "Not even guides. No one says what really happens; just that it's for the best."

"That didn't look like the best for Betty." Beverly said. It was the first time she'd said her name, it fell heavy between them.

Stan took a sip of his drink, he held the whiskey on his tongue until the burn demanded he swallow, "It wasn't."

It was the first time Stan had spoken up for who he was since he was a child in Ms. Collins class. His eyes stung, and he blamed it on the coffee as he took another drink.

Beverly hooked her foot around Stan's ankle. Stan slid his leg over so her shorter one didn't have to stretch to reach him. They drank until the thermos was empty.

It had taken Beverly a long time to see what Sentinels did to guides. But the thing that had taken *Stan* a long time to realize was that Sentinels didn't *do* anything. There was no point to their 'gifts', no divine purpose that could explain how they ran everything. In a way that was even scarier. A group of people who, by all accounts, were ordinary had convinced an entire society that they needed Sentinels

to survive. That guides were a necessary sacrifice of rights to keep Sentinels at their peak.

Soldiers were Sentinels, politicians were Sentinels, leaders were Sentinels. They were stronger than the rest of the world. Carried the burden on greatness like Atlas atop their shoulders. Stan thought about Bill's dad. The man who couldn't leave the dark or his scotch.

Yeah. He really carried the world.

... Bill had though. Bill had carried Stan through thick and thin. Had fought off bullies neither were big enough to stand a chance against. He'd practically raised Georgie. Bill had been a superhero.

Bill had been a superhero who Stan made fly off a cliff.

Sometimes Stan let himself be glad for it, let the oily shame seep in his bones until his marrow became heavy with it. When he was hiding in the dark of his apartment and holding his breath until the sirens stopped. They had been children; Bill wasn't old enough to become cruel yet. Stan didn't know if he could've handled Bill's eyes looking at him like Gretta Keene. Seeing him as an object. Swayed by the unwavering pillars of their world.

Stan would have flown into the rocks himself. But he hadn't. Bill had. The first Sentinel sacrificed in the the name of a guide's safety.

Stan pressed his teeth down into his cheek, slowly applying pressure until the welling blood hurt more than the memories. He clenched a moment longer, then yanked a tissue from his pocket to dab off the blood that seeped from the corner of his mouth. Beverly offered the whiskey bottle, which she had begun to sip straight, "Gotta sterilize that," She joked, though Stan could see concern in her eyes. He took the drink, and winced at the sting.

Handing the bottle back, Stan looked along the street for the minimal foot traffic. The Falcon wasn't a popular scene - never quite catching the hipster demographics eye.

"Like clockwork," Beverly muttered, and Stan followed her gaze to a Richie Tozier walking up the street.

Beverly had already called Mike to say there was a break in and they should cancel screenings for the day. Stan had begun to protest that it was fine, they didn't need to lose a day of profits - he knew she was calling off the day for him. But, the thought of being alone in the dark didn't have the appeal it did before. The locks didn't seem strong enough anymore.

Richie wandered to the front entrance of The Falcon. He was swaying as he stared at the marquee, no longer lit to advertise movies Richie must've seen so many times he memorized them. Stan watched as he stood there, unable to process that he couldn't get inside. For a moment, it almost seemed like he'd break through the makeshift door cover. Rip the posters away and step into the unlit lobby of strewn glass. Beverly looked like she thought so too, her grip on the plastic armrests tightening the longer Richie loitered.

But Richie eventually left, ducking his head low as he huddled deeper into his leather jacket. He didn't look strong at all. He looked like a kid. A lost, scared kid.

"His glasses are gigantic," Stan said, after the boy had turned the corner.

"Maybe he needs them to see," Beverly answered. They both knew he didn't. But his eyes were magnified beyond the idea of non-prescription. Stan didn't get it. Stan didn't get anything about Richie.

"Did he really ask about me," Stan asked, tongue loose from honeyed liquor, "Or was that a way to get into my secret base?"

Beverly laughed, "I could've seduced you to get up there. Gone on about your cherub curls for five more minutes and you'd've let me up."

"I'm not that vain," Stan protested.

Beverly nodded along, "Just about your hair," The sneaker jabbing at her ankle was met with a laugh, but her face settled into something softer, honest, "He does. I thought I knew why, but he's too out of it to ever be a plant for a Center. I think he just remembers you."

“He doesn’t though,” Stan admitted, “He doesn’t see me at all.”

It felt less dramatic to say to someone who knew what he meant. Had seen what he could do.

“Then maybe he wants to remember you.”

Beverly sounded optimistic for Stan, tentative hope that he could be happy with Richie, like it was even a remote possibility. Maybe she was a romantic for the stories, the way things used to be. When guides and Sentinels found each other through random encounters and connected so dearly that they could never forget each other. It was a sweet, misplaced thought. It made Stan’s ribs ache.

“He can’t,” Stan answered simply.

“I know.”

Stan watched Beverly peel the label off her bottle, picking away glue until only the small bee logo remained. They sat and talked about anything and nothing at all until Beverly checked her phone. Stan didn’t remember it being so shitty looking; it flipped open to show chipped off buttons with a splintered crack across screen. He didn’t think they even made those anymore.

Beverly took one more swig and asked, “Wanna go grab a drink?”

“Sure.”

Beverly rode a bike, and only had to coerce Stan a little to stand on the back pegs. He’d insisted he pedal, she was smaller than him and would fit better, but one look at how small the *bike* was left him clinging to her shoulders for dear life.

They swerved around cars and hugged turns at alarming speeds. Beverly’s hair whipped like brush fire as she sped through the Los

Angeles streets. It felt like a small miracle they made it unharmed, besides Stan tripping getting off the bike; but apparently that didn't count.

The bar was a complete dive. Weather and age created uneven stain across old wood carvings that wrapped around a neon glow of The Taproom. The windows had antique painted glass and minimal cracks between panels. The bar had a tattoo parlor on one side and an alleyway on the other. A pang of guilt rang through Stan's chest as he noted the obscured side exit. Beverly's arm was linked through his own once they locked her bike to a lamppost, navigating the busier foot traffic as Stan stumbled slightly tipsy beside her.

Stan watched her cut seamlessly through bustling bodies. She looked like a friend. Maybe the best friend Stan'll ever have. A smile on her freckled cheeks with a fresh cig safe behind her ear. She felt like Bill, in a way. Brash confidence, a familial protection to her that felt like he hadn't done anything to earn it. But she was aware, observant in a way Bill had never been. She'd grown up into what he could've been if he had understood.

The door swung open with a harsh squeak, and Mike looked up from a beer to wave them over. It was concerningly early for a drink, they were the only occupied table, but Stan couldn't really judge at this point. There was another man sitting with Mike, a huge bulking figure of muscle and weight. His peacoat was stretched across his skin, and his flinch from the door was all Stan needed to see.

Stan tensed under Beverly's arm, the makings of a trap, a snare closing around his throat like a linking collar. She squeezed his elbow to her breast, digging his thin arm against her own until he looked down to her steady gaze.

"Trust me," She said, like it was that easy, like it wasn't an open opportunity to a death sentence. But... Beverly Marsh had not failed him yet.

Stan let his foot slide forward, carrying them both to the table.

"Sure."

The man didn't look at Stan right away, purposefully keeping his eyes on his drink. Jesus, Stan didn't know if it was legal to put whiskey in a glass that big. It suited him, strangely enough. Big guy, thick beard, big drink. The man was almost a tower; Stan bet he could loom over the best of them.

He didn't look like he *would* though. He'd smiled so... cutely when Bev had put a cig behind his ear with a kiss to his cheek. It shouldn't have fit his face so well, but the man was a teddy bear. His eyes were thin, but soft in his sockets. His posture was small for all his mass, like he didn't feel comfortable with how much space he took up. He wasn't unattractive by any means, but he didn't look like he'd agree with that. He only looked up once Stan was seated, and even then his eyes landed on his shoulder.

"Stanley, Benjamin," Beverly greeted, "Benjamin, Stanley."

"Ben is fine," He said, voice surprisingly soft, almost high, "Nice to meet you." He didn't offer a hand, but nodded with a wide smile.

Stan nodded back, "Stan is fine too, or Stanley. Beverly really just says whatever she wants,"

Ben laughed at that, a breathy snort, "Yeah, well, welcome to the club." He nodded to the bar, "Can I grab you a drink?"

"Uh, water is fine," Stan had drank more in the morning than he'd had in years. Ben smiled again, and slid out of his stool to approach the counter top. Stan turned to Mike, "Was this all a step up for a date?"

Mike laughed, "No, he's just that nice," He took a sip of his beer, "Polite too. It's almost unnerving. Too nice for his own good."

Stan almost told the pot it was rude to call the kettle black, but Ben returned a moment later with his glass. Stan sipped the water slowly,

letting the other three lull back into conversation without him. He watched Ben carefully. Ben noticed, nowhere near the poker face Beverly or Mike had; but he didn't seem to mind.

Glasses slowly filled the table, mapping out the empty drinks between them. Stan finally joined in on the second round and nursed a beer as Mike and Bev and Ben threw back like champs. His low tolerance wasn't anything he wanted to risk in a public place, but it felt a little like the college he'd missed out on.

He'd enrolled a single year before coming to close to being caught, a Sentinel professor had been handsy and Stan was too scared to say anything. He'd even been bonded, had a pretty little thing who sat in his office. But kept going on about how bright Stan was, wanted a side piece to his side piece. Stan couldn't say if it was his status that had attracted him, but he didn't want to risk finding out. One year into an accounting degree. He took another gulp.

The mood had shifted around Stan into something somber. He'd been too lost in thoughts of cruel older men to notice how tight Ben was holding his mug. Beverly leaned close, and Stan felt himself lean in too.

"Did you have to go today?" Beverly asked, voice low despite the empty room.

"Yeah," Ben admitted, "I was just, y'know, I," He drank, "Yeah. I did."

Stan didn't know what that meant. But Mike and Beverly's face didn't make it seem good.

Mike turned to Stan, "Ben works at an architect firm, putting the rest of us to shame, but things can get... loud?" He looked to Ben for confirmation, and was met with a quick nod, "Loud, so he has to go to the Center."

Stan's spine locked up at the mention of the Center. He looked at Ben who was looking into his drink again.

"There aren't enough guides to Sentinels," Ben began, "So the ones

who are still on a waitlist have to balance out by booking sessions.”

“There’s a waitlist?” Stan asked.

“Huge one,” Ben huffed, “It’s... you have to be compatible and important enough. Especially in the city. Too many of us to all be paired. They have a lottery system based on merit, wealth - though they say that has nothing to do with it - and priority. You’ll never see a CEO without one, but a bank teller is probably out of luck. So the bank teller joins the waitlist from when they’re a kid and stays on it until they become ‘lucky’.

“It’s almost like courting, if courting meant horribly awkward speed dating with children half your age. Guides get trained until they’re fit for service, and once they are they go off of the list of who is going to be tested for compatibility. Once they know if you’re a match you... take them home. Like a pet. A self aware pet.” Ben took laughed like any of that was supposed to be funny, normal, in a sick way it was, “I’m on it, and high up the list by some freak chance, but I still need sessions.”

The word struck something wrong in Stan, something foul, “What the fuck is a session?” Stan’s throat was going dry, jaw clenching at the guilty look on Ben’s face.

“Stan - “ Beverly cut in, trying to diffuse the situation. Ben seemed so nice, but he - he -

“No,” Ben finally spoke, eyes wide, “It’s not, shit, no, Stan it’s not that. Whatever you’re thinking it’s not... it’s, like - training. Guides don’t usually know how to ease someone on instinct, and Sentinels who aren’t bonded need a guide to function; so they pair you up. It’s like, a therapy session almost.”

Stan’s jaw didn’t unclench, but that wasn’t nearly what he’d feared. There were kids in the Center, almost all kids.

“It’s still, it’s awful, but,” Ben sighed, and swirled his mug between his hands, “There’s this guy there, tiny as shit - I almost thought he was a kid at first. But he sure doesn’t talk like one,” A smile cracked across Ben’s face again, it suited him better than the stormy look

from a moment ago.

"We're compatible," He continued, "At least it feels like we are. I get assigned to him every time. He's funny, which, I don't know how you can be in there. But he is. He smiles sometimes, which, God he really looks like a kid when he does that. A real brat."

Stan didn't speak for a long moment, staring at Ben staring at his drink, "You mean he's happy there?"

"Oh, God," Ben laughed, "No. No fucking way,"

Ben threw back the rest of his glass, Christ, that must've been his fourth by now. Stan was losing track.

"But," Ben began, cutting through the weight at their table, "He looks like he wants to kick my ass. Like he's still alive in there." He didn't wave for another round, "I keep going because I want to make sure he's okay enough to still be angry. Okay enough to make fun of me a little and smile when I don't get mad at him for it."

"They have a collar on him," Ben admitted.

"What?" Stan asked, stunned. He watched the way Ben fiddled with the cigarette behind his ear. Would the suffocating metal stay on Betty?

"They do it to the 'difficult' ones. All the rog - older guides - wear them. They don't trust them enough not to hurt someone."

Stan thought of the quarry, of Gretta, "A guide can't hurt someone." The lie burned on his tongue.

Ben looked at him, eyes startlingly clear for how much whiskey was sloshing in him, "C'mon Stanley," He smiled, "We know they're the strong one."

They're sounded a lot like you're

Stan changed the subject, desperate for a segue out of the knowing look on Ben's face, "You mean like a shock collar?"

"I think so," He winced, "It went off, once, first time I was there."

"Ben -" Mike started,

"It looked like they were trying to kill him. I'd had a headache. Grabbed my head, I think. But they thought he did it."

Beverly squeezed the back of Ben's neck, trying to soothe him through whatever he was seeing. Stan's ribs ached. He pinched them until that hurt more.

"He just shook," Ben continued, "Wheezed and shook like air wouldn't get into his lungs anymore. I asked them to stop. Yelled at them to, but I guess they thought he was doing that too. I wasn't helping him. I tried, but I couldn't. He just sat there and refused to cry after words. Bit his lip and squeezed his eyes shut and held my hand until I felt better.

"I don't know if he resented me for it. I hope he doesn't. He's nice, funny... I just like to make sure he's still there; at least where it counts."

Stan felt for Ben, in a way he hadn't felt for any Sentinel before. Ben felt bad for a kid in their situation, cared about them. "What's his name?" Stan asked.

Ben's jaw ticked. He dragged a hand across his face, trying to wipe away the exhaustion that had settled there.

"I don't know. They don't *have* names in there."

Stan stared at him. Ben tried for a wobbly smile, but it didn't sit right.

"He goes by 54495."

Notes for the Chapter:

thank you to noe for reading this over with me and making sure it wasn't too much of a disaster.

any predictions for what's coming? let me know in

the comments or over tumblr at
@birdboyinthedeadlights

6. uşura

Having Ben, Beverly, and Mike around wrapped Stan in a sense of... security wasn't exactly right. He never felt secure; but guarded seemed close. He knew, realistically, that they could do nothing to stop a link of electricity around his throat. That if a team led by a woman with swamp eyes shattered the door once more; no one could help him.

But he didn't need them to; expecting that would just lead to disappointment. Stan could, and would, take care of himself. He always had.

They just knew *about* him. They knew what he was on a level no one had since Derry's quarry cliff. They all knew, even if he'd never intended to let them, and had this pact not to say a word, never even speaking it aloud to each other. Stan's paranoia never left his spine, but it didn't feel like it controlled his time with any of them. His wayward band of mid twenties losers.

He spoke more at work before he would head up to his locked away room to play the films. He still didn't let Beverly up, but she didn't push it now that he would sneak down to her if he was sure no one else was there. They'd laugh and she'd flick popcorn at him and Mike would join them and it'd be a bubble of contentment for maybe an hour if he was lucky.

It didn't feel normal, but it was the most normal he'd been in years.

So, after sampling icee dipped popcorn - disgusting - at Bev's insistence, when Mike asked, "Can one of you run to the store for more printer paper?" Stan offered without hesitation.

They'd both stared at him, and it took a moment for Stan to realize what he'd done. Stan never offered to run errands, never set foot out of the bricked building until his shift was over.

"Are you sure?" Beverly asked, "I can go, it's no problem."

"Yeah," Mike agreed, "Bev can do it,"

Something tugged in Stan, a dust covered sense of pride; nearly cracking at the pull of indignity.

"It's right across the street," Stan mumbled, "It's two minutes away."

"Yeah," Beverly agreed quickly, "But I can go, you don't need to go out - I mean," She looked to Mike for help.

"You don't need to bother," Mike amended, "Bev can do it,"

"I'm not a baby," Stan said, and god that felt fucking stupid coming out of his mouth. But, it was true. He - he'd survived this long without them, he wasn't, "I'm not invalid."

"Christ, Stan," Beverly sighed, fingers digging into her freckled temple, "We know that, but,"

"I said I'd do it and I'll do it," Stan said.

"... Okay." Mike agreed, and fished out a twenty for him to pay with.

Stan snatched the bill and grabbed his jacket from the office. He felt their eyes lingering on him as he swung the door open, as he snapped his jacket higher at the chill, as he walked to the crosswalk.

Stan felt a sick chill down his spine that had nothing to do with the biting wind. The reluctance to let him leave, to let him help, was unexpected. Maybe it shouldn't have been, they were protective of him after all. But, they'd seen him at this worst, at his scared and vulnerable and jarred.

Stan wasn't fragile, he didn't need special handling. Stan looked back over his shoulder and caught the gaze of Beverly through the glass walls before she turned away to throw popcorn at Mike.

It felt like eyes on him. And whether friendly or the Center; an eye was an eye.

The weight on the back of his neck faded as he crossed the intersection and into a small shopping pavilion. A Target, Best Buy, and Starbucks with an amalgamation of struggling boutiques were all jammed on top of each other. Stan debated between the Target and

Best Buy for a long moment, hugging the wall as he weighed foot traffic to distance he had to cover to find what he needed.

This was stupid. He was getting paper. Stan went shopping every week for food; this was no different. He shook off the weighted looks from Beverly and Mike and walked blindly into Target. Stan had no reason to be edgy or worried about shopping in a crowded store.

Stan was not a guide.

But he was, a voice sneered, clawing pity scraping just behind his eyes. He was fragile. He needed to be protected. He wasn't safe. He was never safe.

Stan dug his nails into his palms, forcing the bite deeper until the ringing of the pain outweighed the panic in his ears. He didn't walk any faster, didn't stutter in his gait. He had no reason to be nervous.

The walk to find the paper took longer than Stan would've liked, and he felt a crick forming in his neck from how tense he was holding it to keep from looking over his shoulder ever ten steps. They'd think he was a shoplifter before guide ever crossed their mind at this rate.

Ream of paper in hand, Stan walked calmly to the self checkout. Not because he was nervous that another person would see something wrong, just...

Stan bought m&m's with Mike's change out of spite.

Only after exiting the Target did Stan realize he couldn't just take the m&m's back with him. They'd melt in his pocket and even if they didn't Mike would hear them rattling in his jacket.

Stan looked back at the store for a moment, about to see if he could return a single candy on the pretense of 'I bought it to be rude to my boss/friend because he's coddling me.'

... Goddammit.

Stan ripped the package open and poured as many as he could fit into his mouth, crunching like a gremlin outside of Target. It was too sweet, too much at once, but Stan bit down through sugar coated

shells with a vendetta.

“Hey!”

Stan choked halfway through his last mouthful. Wheezing around chocolate as and smacking his own chest, he looked up at the voice that came out of nowhere.

“Oh god - I’m sorry, don’t die. Shit.”

Richie stood two feet in front of him, worry on his face mixed with poorly hidden humor as Stan heaved in a breath once he finished dying from candy related asphyxiation. He was bundled more than Stan in a hat that almost completely hid his wild black hair and a scarf tucked all the way to this chin. Though that may be more to do with hiding his face than the cold itself.

Stan stood up to full height, wiped his eyes, and finally processed the boy in front of him.

Oh god, oh fuck. Stan gaped, frozen to the spot. He couldn’t ease his way out of this. They were in the middle of a relatively busy shopping area in broad daylight, it was hardly past noon. He couldn’t make Richie into essentially a sleepwalker and not be noticed; there could be other Sentinels who would pick up on it. Something, anything, *everything* could go wrong.

Richie averted his eyes, “How, uh, how’re you?”

“Tired,” Stan answered. It was honest enough.

“That’s - you look good. I mean, you don’t look tired.” Stan blinked, stunned, as a pink began to dust across the other’s cheeks. Was he - was he nervous? Richie had no reason to be nervous.

He was almost cute like this. Stan didn’t think that was a word that really applied to the boy before; handsome, sure. But the hesitant smile and inability to speak up didn’t fit at all the persona he’d built for himself. Where was the quick wit and loud mouth that was all over the media?

Richie opened his mouth again, eyes flicking back to Stan only to

choke up and look away again. He was holding an alarmingly large Starbucks cup between his hands so tight Stan thought the cardboard would collapse. Neither of them spoke for far too long.

"Uh," Stan finally began.

"I like your jacket," Richie stammered, lucid for the first time since Stan had met him - and somehow worse with articulating himself. Stan looked down at his more than a little ratty sherpa lined denim jacket. It wasn't his own style, but it had been ten dollars and was warm. The arms were too long and it was well worn, but it always smelled nice, "I used to have one like it but it got too small and I put it in goodwill."

"I got this from goodwill," Stan answered without thinking. He shouldn't prolong this, he should walk away, but the way Richie's eyes lit up was a little too much for his heart to take.

"No way, are there still cheezits in the left pocket?"

"... No?"

"Oh, damn, okay," Richie almost looked disappointed. God, there had been cheezits when he got it. He was wearing Richie's jacket. What the fuck.

"Did," Stan took a moment, "Did you want those *back* ?" Stan asked incredulously.

"I mean, who says no to cheezits?" Richie snickered, his cheeks darkened at Stan's arched brow, "I - no, it's okay, I don't need them."

"Great," Stan said, "I mean, I don't have them anymore."

"Yeah - yeah, I figured," Richie rubbed the back of his neck, "Probably ate them,"

"I certainly did *not* eat pocket cheezits."

Richie shrugged, "You do you, man."

"I will do me," Stan quipped.

They both winced at the wording and Richie snickered to himself as Stan stumbled over rephrasing before giving up with a huff.

"It looks good on you," Richie said, "Fits you well, I mean,"

"It's huge on me," Stan argued, waving an arm where only half his fingers could be seen.

"Well it was tiny on me," Richie laughs, "We just gotta find a normal sized person."

Stan huffed, "I'm perfectly normal, you're just a giant."

Neither spoke again, averting gazes and half starting sentences before giving up and staring at their hands. Stan had been gone for awhile now. He should head back. He should've headed back before he even started this weird jilted conversation.

"I've gotta get back to work," Stan muttered, nodding quickly and inching around Richie. He didn't get more than two steps away before he heard Richie sharply inhale.

"Could I," Richie stopped, seemingly almost startled at how fast Stan turned back to him. *Stan* was startled at how fast he'd turned back, "Could we get coffee sometime?"

Stan blinked, "What?"

"Right now even," Richie said, speeding up as he spoke, face getting redder, "I mean, you said you were tired. Coffee wakes up tired people, we could -"

"You," Stan blinked, "You already have a coffee."

Richie looked down at his cup, steam still slipping from the lid, "Oh, uh,"

"Can't get coffee if you already have it," Stan chuckled.

Richie extended his arm abruptly to the left, "Ma'am, would you like a coffee?" The woman aimed at scurried away promptly, but Richie was determined. Asking anyone walking by if they could take the

'caffeinated obstacle' off his hands.

He stopped after the sixth failed attempt. Seemed even a mid level celebrity couldn't shove steamed beverages off onto strangers. Stan was getting uncomfortable from the attention, the eyes flicking over to them both. People would recognize Richie, even with the hat and glasses and hoodie, there was no way they wouldn't soon. Stan's eyes flicked around the pavilion, and landed back on Richie as the taller boy stared at him.

Stan was about to make an excuse, an easy exit about work or anything to get out of broad daylight with a face media followed, when Richie suddenly turned back to him with a confident, "Watch this - yeet ," With barely a glance, Richie whipped his coffee to a trash can at least twenty feet away.

It splattered to the concrete after barely halfway and was a least a yard off course to the right.

Stan choked on a snort despite himself, as Richie stared in betrayal at his completely failed display of athletics. For a moment, Stan was worried he'd leave it like that; liter spewed across the street with no care. He was famous after all, probably didn't have to look beyond anything that suited him - least of all anything that was clearly embarrassing.

Richie looked at Stan, back to the cup, and then the ground as he quietly trotted over to the spilled drink, picked it up, and got a foot away before tossing it again with a quiet, "Yeet," in the recyclable side of the bin.

Stan was too... smitten wasn't a word he'd accept but, god; he didn't even think to leave in the clear gap for a getaway. Richie jogged back over, and flicked his hair casually, only slightly skewing his glasses.

"Oh no. I lost my coffee," He said, smiling crookedly at Stan.

"Yeah it's a real mystery," Stan agreed, eyes crinkling around a smile he had no hope of fighting, "But, I do have to go back to work," He waved the paper ream awkwardly between them, "I was running an errand."

"Yeah, you work at The Falcon," Richie nodded, like he remembered Stan at all. Stan didn't let it show on his face that Richie wasn't supposed to have any idea who he was, "I only ever really see Bev but," Richie stopped talking, eyes growing wide.

"What?" Stan asked, tensing at the expression that suddenly crossed his face.

"I don't know your name," Richie croaked, "Oh my god, I must seem like a stalker, I'm - god, I'm sorry. I *threw a coffee*,"

"Yeah, that must've been like, six bucks," Stan said, and Richie laughed at that as he continued to panic.

"Ohhh, yeah, that was a waste. I didn't even make the shot."

"So close though," Stan agreed.

"Thanks, babe," Richie's eyes bulged, "Not *babe* babe, uh, I just," He finally stopped floundering, frozen like a factory reset. And sheepishly smiled, "I'm Richie. What's your name?"

Stan debated lying. He could lie.

"Stanley."

"Stanley," Richie repeated, cheeks flushing again, magnified from where it rose behind his glasses, "Stanley the Manly."

Stan squinted, smile pushing through his grimace, "Sure,"

"At the risk of really solidifying my stalker image," Richie began, "Is there any way I could get your number?"

"I..." Stan hesitated, he'd never given his number out. Mike and Beverly didn't know his number.

"I mean, I'd rather you were able to send a warning text when I'm about witness you inhaling m&m's like a demon."

A laugh startled out of Stan's throat, "You're a dick,"

"Dickard Tozier, that's me." Richie smiled, and bit his lower lip, "But, I mean, you don't have to,"

Stan's throat clogged somewhere between admission and rejection, unable to choose the obvious. His eyes trailed away, a heat dusting his own cheeks down his neck, as he listened to Richie helplessly ramble how Stan didn't have to and he's not a stalker and saying he isn't a stalker this much must make him really seem like one now -

Stan's eyes landed on a bench back the way he'd came, skirting the edge of the pavilion with a clear view of him.

Mike was hovering beside the bench, watching him. Stan froze in place, staring at Mike, paper nearly falling from his grip before he clenched it violently. Mike caught the dark look that came across Stan's face and made to walk up to him, posture adapting to someone handling a skittish animal.

Richie trailed off suddenly as Stan took off away from him towards Mike, sneakers loudly smacking the concrete beneath him as he got into Mike's face.

"How *dare* you," Stan sputtered, voice hissing between clenched teeth.

Mike raised his hands, "Stan,"

"No," Stan grabbed Mike's wrist, yanking him along behind him back across the street, "How fucking dare you,"

Mike didn't fight him, let himself be pulled along by Stan. Stan's blood boiled over at that, at how he allowed it, how he looked at Stan with something too close to pity in his eyes. Stan jammed his key into the projection door, punched the code in, and violently shouldered the hatch door open. Mike was barely inside the cramped room before Stan kicked the door shut behind them.

"This is the same as keeping me on a registry," Stan spit.

Mike, for the first time, had any reaction other than coddling, "Don't say that,"

Stan didn't let him finish, "*You* don't tell me what to do, Mike. You don't own me,"

"I never said I did," Mike insisted, anger rising in his tone.

"But you act like you do - "

"What do you want me to do, Stan?" Mike demanded, brows scrunched and hands clenched.

"Just be my friend!" Stan shouted, voice cracking out as his eyes stung despite himself, "Just let - just let me have a *friend*!"

"I *am* being your friend!" Mike bellowed, the timbre of his voice almost rattling Stan's bones, "You're being a brat!"

"You're not my friend, you're my fucking keeper!"

Mike froze at that, face softening back to that fucking pity all over again, "Stan,"

"I haven't had a friend since," He sucked in a ragged breath, "I - and I thought I did. But if you think I'm some fragile thing you found and get to *keep* then you can fuck off. You act like I can't do anything; like I haven't fucking lived my life like this the entire time." The tear tracks cut across his cheeks, hand fisting into his own shirt, clenching the fabric in a shaking fist, "I can handle myself. I don't need you or Bev or Ben to constantly be watching me like I'm some caged animal that's going to lash out at any moment. This might be a new thing for you," Stan gestured between the two of them, "Having a guide as a friend, but I know how to take care of myself."

"I lost someone already," Mike corrected softly, "They were just a kid, I could've protected them and I didn't. I don't want to make that mistake again."

"I'm not a kid, Mike," Stan said firmly but not coldly, "And you can't protect me; not when it counts."

Mike looked like he wanted to argue; defend and assure he'd save Stan - that he'd redeem himself. But they both knew it wasn't true. If Sentinels came pounding on the door history would just repeat itself.

Stan's shoulders sagged in relief when Mike nodded.

"I'm sorry." Mike admitted, hands down by his sides, "I just, I worry about you. There's almost nothing in this world that isn't *against* you and I - we just wanted to be on your side."

"Then be on my side," Stan begged, "Don't act like I belong to you, like I'm yours to protect."

Mike just nodded. Stan could see the tears flecking off his dark lashes in the low light. He didn't offer comfort, it wouldn't be genuine. But he nodded back. They stared at each other, looked at each other.

Stan didn't doubt Mike saw him as an equal. But if he couldn't treat him as an equal... Stan would leave. Stan wasn't going to be owned by anyone, no matter their intentions.

He'd die first.

"Uh, guys?" A voice called from an empty theatre, "Richie is here."

Stan's head whipped to the window, and both he and Mike looked down to see Beverly standing with a concerned Richie.

"Hi?" Richie called up, and Stan turned to head back down the stairs.

Mike's hand reached out and grabbed Stan's wrist. Stan went to jerk away but Mike held fast. He turned, ready to start yelling again if need be, but Mike's face wasn't like before.

"I trust you," Mike said, "And we're all here when you need us."

"I know that," Stan mumbled, "I've always known that."

"Good," Mike finally smiled, better suited to his face than any hurt or anger could ever be.

They both came back into the hallway, puffy eyes from their fight. God, Stan hadn't gotten into a fight with anyone since... he blinked, he'd never been in a fight at all. Too cautious to even try, better to evade, to run.

He almost turned to tell Mike as much, maybe ease the last scraps of tension away from between them, when Richie and Bev rounded the corner. Beverly's eyes were icy, cold and alert as she approached the two. Stan was about to tell her it was okay, but Mike spoke first, "C'mere, Bev," He said, kind smile on his face, and juttet his chin for her to follow.

She hesitated a moment, looking between the three boys, before settling on Stan. She furrowed her brow, but apparently saw what she needed in his gaze and turned away. Richie and Stan were left alone in the hallway.

Stan didn't have the nerve to let them fall back into silence all over again and blurted out, "You followed me?"

Richie looked diffident, "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

Stan bristled just a bit, leftover prickling behind his eyes at the confession, "I don't -"

"I mean clearly you handled it," Richie laughed, "I thought you were gonna kick *my* ass at first. You looked almost psychotic. Honestly I was seeing if you needed help hiding the body after."

Stan took him in, admittedly... smitten.

"Guess this is really the nail my stalker persona coffin?" Richie said hushedly, rubbing his neck again.

"Absolutely," Stan agreed, a soft smile pulling between his cheeks, "Complete maniac."

"A maniac and a psycho," Richie hummed, "Sounds good to me."

Notes for the Chapter:

i love two (2) disaster boys who don't know how to communicate.

what do you think is gonna happen? what do you hope is gonna happen? lemme know in the comments or send me a message on tumblr!

7. hampitony

Notes for the Chapter:

happy chrysler here's a chapter it's like a miracle but different

i will reply back to all of these comments if it kills me i love all y'all

"It can't be safe to have that much sugar," Stan commented, watching Beverly fill an alarmingly large icee for Richie, "Don't give him the large, Jesus, that's huge,"

"That's what she said," Bev and Richie both answered, high fiving each other without even looking. God, they're the worst.

Stan sat perched on the back concessions counter, fingers drumming a dizzy pattern across his khakis. Richie's eyes kept darting to his hands. He couldn't seem to settle on one thing; flicking between the icee machine, the lights, and back to Stan's hands. Stan stopped, and Richie's shoulders lost a thread of their tension.

Richie turned to Stan, "If you could be any vegetable, which would you be?"

"God, you're insufferable." The words didn't match his tone, mouth quivering into a smile at the casual attention, "What does that even mean?"

"That's not an answer," Beverly said.

"Yeeeah, Uris, don't try to pull a fast one," Richie drawled, a thick Brooklyn accent dripping into his speech with alarming accuracy yet stereotype, "We wan' anshars an' we wann'em now!" He jutted his jaw out with a slammed fist to the counter. Stan didn't flinch at the sudden movement.

"This is stupid. You're both stupid." Stan definitely did *not* smile.

"The kiddo's holdin' out, Marshie," Richie spit, eyes blazing as he

elbowed Bev, “He ain’t gonna give us the skin off a grape.”

“Much less a vegetable,” Beverly agreed somberly, a much less convincing and almost mildly Bostonian accent wobbling out.

“Oh my god, carrot, I pick carrot.”

“Now see here, Mister Stanley,” Richie swaggered, pulling a drag from a pantomime cigarette, “That’s a *penis* plant-”

“- I’m leaving.”

“Nooo,” Richie keened, laughing as the voice fell away, “Who will scold my beverage choices?”

“Literally anyone besides Beverly,” Stan answered, “How are you even drinking that? It’s freezing out - ”

A well timed sneeze sprung out. Richie chirped a “Bless ya, boy,” with an encore of the Brooklyn impression.

Richie had become a facet of The Falcon, days blurring into weeks of him wandering through newly repaired glass doors to movies Stan wasn’t sure he even watched.

He wanted to ask sometimes; how he could stand the noise and lights and everything he wasn’t supposed to be able to medically tolerate. Stan kept it to himself, there was no reason for Stan to ask. Richie was, for all Stan was supposed to know, not a Sentinel.

And Stan wasn’t a guide.

So the two boys who didn’t know anything they weren’t supposed to simply orbited around each other with Beverly’s supervision. Quick jokes and quicker glances; never really directly speaking to each other.

“One not-Stan-approved icee,” Beverly announced, setting the cup on the counter, “And a pack of m&m’s.”

“Thanks, Bev,” Richie grabbed the snacks, and looked to Stan with a smile, “See ya, psycho,”

“Maniac,” Stan nodded, tapping his heels against the cupboard as he watched Richie walk away.

Beverly’s eyebrows slowly rose, an exhausted expression on her face as she said, “My god, you two are gross.”

“What?” Stan asked, still looking at the door that swung shut.

“You have *nicknames*,” Beverly sighed, “It couldn’t be gayer or cuter if you tried and I’m offended that I have to witness it.”

Stan’s lips pursed, refusing to acknowledge the prickling in his cheeks as he mumbled, “Shut up,”

“It’s, again, nauseating. I shouldn’t be subjected to interactions that pure,” Beverly slipped her cigarette between her lips, letting it wag up and down as she jutted her jaw. Stan thought about asking if it was a metaphor. She’d punched him last time he had. He barely held his tongue.

“We’re just - *he’s* just here. I don’t know him.” Stan didn’t. Not really. He just - he’d googled him. He only knew what anyone else did.

Except for the Sentinel sized elephant in the room.

“He clearly wants to know you,” Beverly offered, her dramatic disgust was gone.

“Or he’s playing us to get free icees. You didn’t charge him for that last one.”

Beverly snorted, freckles on her nose scrunching when she smiled at Stan, “His master plan has come to fruition.”

She had been edgier initially, a cold fire in her eyes when Richie asked for him by name. But, after the first jilted interaction of the trio, she turned to Stan and had said, “He’s harmless,” Everything was much more casual with the Beverly Marsh seal of safety in place.

“Christ, it’s cold. You’re right, I don’t know how Richie drinks anything frozen.” Bev hissed, burrowing deeper into her hoodie, “I thought LA was supposed to be warm. This is bullshit,”

"Yeah, this city has a way of always letting you down," Stan agreed, snapping his jacket up to his neck. It was unnaturally cold lately, and the old building didn't do anything except somehow make it worse. Stan had grown up in Maine, used to frigid mornings and nose numbing nights; but that didn't make it suck any less.

Stan paused as he watched Beverly shiver. He had no idea where she was from. Granted, Beverly didn't know the same for him, but it felt like he should. They were friends, right? Friends knew those things. Stan knew how to make friends... Stan knew how a five year old made friends. How different could twenty years make it?

"Was it not cold where you're from?" He tried, voice cracking as he lilted the question too hard.

Beverly looked at him, a soft surprise on her face, before flipping her curly bangs dramatically, "I have no origin, I travelled on the wind."

"See, that just makes me think you're from Idaho," Stan mused, "Or some other lame state."

"Do I strike you as the Idaho type?" Beverly asked, leaning on the counter next to him, hip resting against his knee.

"You strike me as the single teenage rebel in Idaho type," Stan explained, "The one who dyed their hair and gave themselves tattoos. Ran away the second they got a chance."

Beverly's face twitched, a small tick, but Stan felt he'd struck something he shouldn't have. She smiled at him, "Well that's not completely off," She hopped up on the counter, eyes far away as she went on, "It was Oregon, just outside of Portland. No hair dye, but I've got... four mildly regrettable tattoos. Ran off to the big city."

"Portland's a pretty big city," Stan said.

"Didn't feel far enough," Beverly hummed, "What about you?"

"Maine," Stan offered, "Small town, insignificant."

"Did you come to the city to make it big?" Beverly joked.

Stan smiled at that, “Oh, yeah, name in lights.”

She didn’t say anything else. Neither did Stan. Both were content to just sit in each other’s space as the muffled movie echoed around them.

The moment felt settled, and Stan nearly began to doze off before Beverly spoke once more, voice soft, “He seemed jumpy.”

Stan knew who she meant.

“A little, yeah,” Stan agreed, “Probably all the sugar you’re giving him.”

“I’m an employee, not his mom,” Beverly laughed.

“Yeah, well,” Stan grimaced, “It doesn’t help,”

“There’s not much that helps that sort of state,” Beverly offered, unsaid advice dangling between them.

Stan felt the tension crawl up him, settling between his vertebrae, “It’s a shame,” He finally said, voice lower than a hush.

“Stan,” Beverly began, but stopped herself. Stan felt her eyes on him, clear eyes cutting within his peripherals. Stan didn’t know if she found what she was looking for, but she spoke again. “He adores you.”

“That’s a little bit of an exaggeration,” Stan’s fingers began to drum again, the beat had no rhythm, “He’s just nice. He’s a nice guy.”

“He adores *you*,” She pressed, “He knows *nothing about you*, and he comes every day.”

“He likes-” *what Stanley is*, “Everyone. He’s just friendly.” Richie liked the guide. Knew him on a subconscious level that Stan prayed would never surface into awareness.

Beverly looked like she wanted to argue, but didn’t push. She hopped off the counter, and stood between Stan’s knees. His eyes were helpless but to meet her’s. She smiled, almost sadly, and whispered,

“You haven’t helped him in weeks. You haven’t done anything but be yourself. And he still shows up. He likes *you* , Stanley Uris. Not whatever you think he selected from you.”

Stan didn’t say anything to that. She knew what he was worried about; what he was sure about. But insisting it wouldn’t change the way here eyes looked at him. Beverly couldn’t *feel* what he was the way Richie could. Stan couldn’t sway or soothe her on a sensory level. She knew Stan as just Stan because she couldn’t possibly see deeper than that.

Richie could - whether or not he was aware that he was. He... *liked* Stan only because Stan’s entire genetic build was compatible to Richie’s own. Stan had an empathetic pull that could influence and steady Richie’s own heightened sensory capabilities. There was nothing romantic or friendly about it, it was just... what it was.

Stan looked at the wall, where an orange poster crookedly sat.

REPORT ROGUES

There was no room for anything else.

Beverly’s voice rattled around Stan’s head with every dragging step he took home. She’d offered him a ride, but Stan didn’t want to stray from his routine. Had to keep his own system in place of blending and being incredibly normal. Also, her bike was scary.

The Center loomed above him, the deep shadows of the setting sun casting the steel monster in a menacing glow. Stan didn’t look directly at it, but could feel it as if it were dragged along his chill bitten skin. Impossible to ignore.

Stan was afraid he was becoming too comfortable. His friendships had lowered his guard; just *talking* to Richie was a risk Stan wouldn’t have taken a month ago. Christ, he *hadn’t* risked it a month ago.

Being invisible didn't involve Richie or his magnified glasses or the way his shoulders bunched when he laughed.

That train of thought needed to stop right now. Stan physically shook himself, biting his lip violently as he turned the padlock to his apartment. Piper cooed in greeting and Stan trilled back as he pulled his jacket off.

He made himself a sandwich of slightly stale bread and peanut butter. Piper hopped next to him until he held out his hand for her to climb up.

"You're gonna need to fly soon, babylove," He hummed, "Spoiling you with this Stanley chauffeur service."

She nipped his earlobe and he took it for answer enough. An especially rigid corner of his crust was ripped off and crumbled until he had a pile of crumbs in his palm. Piper and him ate together on his cot.

"You're all I need," Stan sang, a senseless little tune, "All I'm ever gonna need,"

Piper nipped his ear again.

Nothing about Richie was worth the risk of capture. Being selfish would just lead to being locked away in a tower like an old fairytale; except no one would come for him. Stan's story was one of survival, of evasion and avoidance and detachment that would open the door to unfound peace that his birthright didn't allow.

But his chest ached at the thought of it. After he'd allowed himself a taste - now it was impossible to resist. Every day he laid his neck out for the guillotine, risked everything he'd worked for to stare at a boy for five minutes. He looked over to a small box beside his cot, full of faded and worn road maps. Each sheet was coating in a self made language of hieroglyphics, stores to avoid, streets to walk, places to hide.

Stan could leave. Right now. He suddenly sprang up, grabbing the single duffel bag he owned. Piper squeaked indignantly at how she

jostled from her perch on his shoulder. Stan grabbed clothes, packaged food, and Piper's birdseed; shoving them all into the worn canvas bag. He could go. He should go. He *needs* to go.

Stan stared at the box of maps.

Richie's laugh echoed in his ribs.

Stan methodically unpacked the bag.

Richie was already at the concessions stand when Stan finally gathered the nerve to wander down. Stan knew when he'd be there - roughly, at least - since he always showed up for a movie around the same point in the day. The genre didn't matter, just that it ended up being a matinee right around noon. With only six showings a day max, he wasn't hard to track.

Stan had stayed up in his tower for longer than his time slot allowed. Richie should be gone, off to a movie he paid... god, he really paid too much for them. The concessions alone had to add up astronomically.

Previews had just wrapped up when Stan began to shuffle down the steps. Richie had mentioned once that they were his favorite part. Something about trying to guess the twists and relationships. His face had lit up when he'd said it. Stan always tried to make sure he was on his way before the first rating guide would come up. He was just... being polite. That was all.

But Richie wasn't sitting three from the left in the row behind the wheelchair seating. He hadn't told that one to Stan. Stan had just seen him always sitting there whenever he - whenever Stan looked through the projection window. It was purely for safety; keeping a head count. Richie always put his feet up on the bar in front of him and slouched until his shoulders nearly brushed the bottom cushion. Stan didn't know how someone that tall could fold up like that, but

he wasn't about to ask. Richie would know he'd been watching him.

So Stan watched Richie stand at the concessions counter with a bemused Beverly. He already had his m&m's and icee. The cup was dripping condensation down into a ring around the faux marble counter, the top layer of frozen treat beginning to crystalize as all the liquid sank to the bottom. It had been a fair bit since the drink had been poured.

Richie had been waiting for him.

The fact that the thought didn't send a jolt of suspicion down Stan's spine was almost more concerning than the suspicion itself would've been. Richie no longer - at least in the subconscious - posed a threat. A flinching pain beneath his ribs had been replaced with an almost gentle tug; a soothing feeling. A guide to hi - a Sentinel. A very specific Sentinel.

But a Sentinel nonetheless.

Stan let the edge of his nail dig violently between his ribs beneath folded arms. No flinch crossed his face, but the easy pull faded away as a drop of blood bloomed against the fibers of his shirt. He barely kept the influence out of his voice when he said, "The previews already started,"

"Yeah," Beverly agreed, leaning further against the counter and looking up at Richie, "What's holdin' you up, sport?"

"I just," Richie made a vague gesture to a carton on the counter. The register had blocked it as Stan approached, but he could now see it nestled between Richie's palms - not quite touching, almost guarding.

Stan looked to the carton. Back to Richie. Beverly. Richie. Carton.

"Well this is riveting," Beverly cut through the silence, "But Mike needs help with the movie documents. The documents for the movies, you know, very real. Perfect timing, Stan, truly."

And without a chance to cut in; Beverly was gone. Stan was just out of arm's reach, but he was alone. He was alone with Richie Tozier for the first time since... the beginning. Even in the plaza there'd been

people everywhere. He'd been too visible to make the situation resolve itself.

But he could now.

Stan looked at Richie, eyes moving slowly. Not being a threat with an audience was very different from not being a threat *alone*. The push was aching beneath his tongue, the desire to send him away without consequence felt... wrong. Guilt ridden.

There was no room for anything else -

"*Soup!*" Richie blurted, then covered his eyes with a groan.

Stan looked at the carton again and watched as Richie seemingly begged for death. It looked, admittedly, hilarious. And Stan pursed his lips to hide a smile for Richie's sake. He didn't move closer, but he didn't send him away.

Eventually, Richie seemed to gather his confidence again. He spoke with an overly level voice, eyes staring a thousand yards ahead, gravely serious, "I brought you soup."

"... Why?"

"You're," Richie gestured vaguely around the empty lobby, "You said you were cold. And you sneezed. I - there's a deli down the block with good soup. Ten outta ten soup," He cut himself off with another groan, but less like he was contemplating running into traffic.

"That's," Stan didn't know what that was. No one had ever gotten him... soup. Except his mom, when he was little and would come in from snow days, "Thank you, Richie,"

Stan was almost worried he'd eased him with how the other boy's shoulders went slack. The name rolled easy off his tongue, like it belonged there. Richie seemed to think so. Stan tried not to think about he'd replay it in his head and whisper it to Piper that night.

Richie didn't step closer to him, but slid the soup to the edge of the counter. It was still just out of reach, barely a step, but Richie stepped away to lean on the counter. It was calculated, Stan didn't

doubt Richie's perceptiveness, but it didn't hold any ill intent.

Stan stepped forward, picked up the soup, and hopped up onto the counter. Richie smiled with a soft surprise, Stan didn't let his gaze stick to it. How it felt warmer than the steaming carton between his palms.

They sat for a long moment, Richie's nervous energy radiating into Stan, before Stan opened the lid. A thick, rich broccoli and cheese greeted him. Stan dove into it with much less tact than he probably should've had.

Richie seemed to settle into his bones, calmer now that his gift had been given. Stan had read about courting once, how Sentinels would woo guides and guides were free to do the same. Everyone was on equal ground to offer love and companionship. Old black and white movies would show nervous Sentinels in knit jerseys offering to lasso the moon for shy guides in bathrobes. Things seemed sweet back then. Softer. Richie looked soft in the fluorescent lights.

Stan ate the soup as Richie began to babble, staring down at the checkered tiles that danced beneath them. The quick drawl of stringed together stories was enough to make Stan feel like he was floating, like he was safe. He didn't need to look at the boy and risk being pulled deeper into the delusion.

But, he could pretend. Just a little.

But soon the soup ran out. The dialogue between them began to be cut into further by the one in the movie. The icee was nothing but a flat soda.

Richie's fingers drummed along the counter, palms curling around the edge as he rocked on his heels. He didn't look like he wanted to move, didn't want to leave the odd little oasis they'd created once more. Stan didn't either, but Richie had finally paused. He looked to Stan, as if waiting for his excuse to walk away and leave Richie behind. Stan wasn't sure he wanted that.

"I know about you," Stan said, and nearly jolted as violently as Richie since that was the *worst* way to start a conversation between two very

specific people with very specific secrets.

“What?” Richie demanded.

“I mean,” Stan flustered, “I know about SNL.”

“Oh,” Richie said, but the tone was too soft to be the relief Stan was expecting. “Okay.”

“Are -” Stan paused, trying to decide if searching for eye contact would be wise; he didn’t want to... to ease him. He liked just *talking* to the boy who never seemed to run out of things to say, “ - Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Richie clearly lied, “Yeah, it’s just,” He blew a raspberry and began to drum his fingers faster, eyes flitting.

“I don’t believe the rumors,” Stan offered, voice barely a whisper.

Richie stilled. Stan nearly swore. How fucking stupid could he get? The drug rumors started because people didn’t think he was a Sentinel which *Stan* wasn’t supposed to think either.

But the fragile, “Really?” That slipped out of Richie stopped any backpedalling Stan could even begin to work out.

“I mean,” Stan began, voice over exaggerated in question, “I haven’t seen you shooting heroin between your alarming levels of sugar,”

“ *Excuse me* , you’re the one who eats candy like you need an exorcism.”

“Fuck *right* off,” Stan giggled.

A remarkably easy laugh echoed between them and Richie’s posture rocked back into the soft relaxation it was before. “Thanks,” He began, “It’s not true. The drug shit. But, y’know, TMZ isn’t keen on getting told their sweet gossip isn’t really accurate,”

Stan hummed agreement like he had any idea what it was like to be stalked by people who knew nothing about him but wanted all of his personal information to be dissected for the world’s pleasure and use.

... *huh*.

Stan couldn't say anything about it beyond a hum. Didn't want to question it further and help them both dig Stanley a grave. Too many leaps in logic were possible, too many variables. If his hesitation showed, Richie didn't comment on it.

"Saturday Night was fun," Richie said, "Really fun. Fucking amazing. But... I dunno, I wasn't cut out for it. It was a lot. Stress, pressure, other things successful people bitch about. I was excited to be the noticed one at first; sorta the breakout star deal. Big shit was coming my way, but - it, fuck, it just swelled up on me.

"I had this, like, ball. That was me. The ball, I mean," He looked to Stan, hoping anything made sense. Stan nodded for him to continue, "The ball had always been rubber. Bounced back no matter how hard I dropped it, threw it even. So when shit got good I would toss it up, reach higher, knowing it would be okay. It'd bounce back up.

"Except, one day, I - it wasn't right. The way it'd move. The way I'd move. I couldn't adapt like before, like I'd trained - like I'd made myself adapt. I was like a water balloon now. And I didn't want to get thrown anymore

"But it wasn't an option anymore. I had to keep throwing my water balloon higher and higher into the air until I just," He swallowed hard, "I couldn't catch it. And it exploded at my feet."

Stan blinked once, twice, until the prickling behind his eyes went away. It didn't, but he would pretend until it was true. Richie looked flayed open, guts spilled across the floor from his burst balloon. He sucked his upper lip between his teeth, tugging the flesh until the skin around it went white. Stan wanted to pull it from his bite, press his thumbs along Richie's brows until the tension there ebbed away.

He didn't; but he did rest a hand between them. He hoped the gesture looked as big as it felt.

Richie finally released his lip and looked down at the hand between them. The corners of his mouth quivered and tugged as his eyes widened a hair. He looked at Stan's face and Stan didn't let himself

look away, though he didn't meet his eyes. Richie slid the icee and m&m's away and perched on the counter next to Stan.

"You're sitting in a puddle," Stan said, nodding at the ring of condensation that was now most assuredly under Richie's ass.

"I'm mopping up my mess, be grateful," He answered. Stan snorted, rolling his eyes at Richie's responding grin.

Why Me? Stan thought desperately. Begging for any answer other than the obvious. Any reason at all that Richie could identify beyond a gut feeling Stan knew was involuntarily there.

He settled on, "Why The Falcon?"

Richie blinked, he'd spaced out for a moment, gazing at what might've been either Stan's curls or the *It's A Wonderful Life* poster just behind him. "Oh, uh," He shrugged, "I came here a lot as a kid. I grew up around here, though I guess you read that while googling me,"

"You make it sound so invasive," Stan whined.

"Oh, sorry, when you were looking up my information in an international database," Richie amended with a smirk, Stan was gonna smack him, "But I came here a lot growing up, as a kid mainly. It's not exactly a hot spot, so I figured I could avoid anyone who would be lurking outside of the usual spots for me and catch a break," He reached into his bomber jacket and pulled out a small tube connected to his keys. With a click it opened to spill out small earbuds into his palm, "I'll be honest, I usually just eat my snacks and then sleep. Just dull the sounds a bit, low lighting, surprisingly comfy chairs. It's the best part of my day."

"That's adorable," Stan said before he could think to hold his tongue, but Richie just laughed.

"Well, I mean, being scolded about my dietary habits is slowly becoming the *best part* of the best part of my day," He grabbed the cup and sloshed the melted icee around in it, "Looks like you won this round, Uris. No huge sugar drinks for me,"

Stan wanted to point out the m&m's still there, but what came out was, "I didn't make you sit with me,"

Richie smiled, and put his hand beside Stan's own. Not touching.

"Where else would I rather be than with a psycho?"

But close.

"Maybe with a maniac."

Close enough.

Notes for the Chapter:

hhhhh this one hurt to write. lemme know what you think of my two (2) special boys. what do you think is coming?

8. fokotsa

It was a cold morning, the windy chill still refusing to break, when Stan saw Ben Hanscom on the street. He'd never seen him outside of the bar, not even at The Falcon. Then again, not every Sentinel was borderline psychotic like Richie.

It wasn't so much *seeing* Ben that startled Stan, like when a teacher was seen in a grocery store by their student, but where he was going.

Stan had been forced to go off route that morning, tilting off his axis of routine for the sake of Piper. She'd been out of food and Stan needed to find a store open early enough to accommodate his early shift. He'd be working a double today, some festival where other coworkers would be lurking around the tiled floors and carpeted halls. Stan didn't have to actually talk to any of them, safely tucked away in his projection room; but the pet stores would all be closed by the time the last film ended. Piper was easy enough to appease in the morning when he offered her a few blueberries, but that wouldn't last.

So Stan had looked up the only pet store in Los Angeles that opened at the ungodly hour of six in the morning. It had taken him north, and directly along the streets of The Center.

Stan hadn't wanted to go. But Piper needed food and nothing was more important than her. Besides, only a guide would be scared of a building. A monstrous building the split the sky above Stan.

Stan had readied himself for the walk, had set his sights blindly forward and an easy stroll that looked neither interesting nor suspicious. He could do this.

But as Stan rounded the corner to the massive glass entryway Ben stood staring at the doors.

Stan didn't want to say anything, draw attention to himself, but Ben turned at the noise on the nearly empty streets and smiled at him. It looked pulled, tight, so unlike the bar. Stan approached him, if only to not seem odd for ignoring a direct greeting under what must be so

many cameras.

“Hey, Hanscom,” Stan said, god, Ben looked worse up close.

Despite his weary state, there was no lack of kindness as he answered, “Hi, you’re up early.”

“Or I stayed up unreasonably late,” Stan countered, hands jammed in his pockets to hide how violently they were shaking. He’d never been this close before. He could see the lobby from here. Phantoms in pewter uniforms shuffling around with only a slab of glass between them and one of their targets.

Stan looked back to Ben, but didn’t let himself angle away from the doors like his body was begging him to do.

“Well, shit,” Ben laughed, “Can’t argue with that,” Stan watched him look back at the building, brow heavy. His throat clicked, and he spoke again without turning back to Stan, “Look, I, uh,”

“Session, right?” Stan answered, face a molded into a casual enthusiasm, “That’s great, man. I hope you get yours soon,” Just getting one, a guide, like they weren’t people. They weren’t here, “Hope that little guy still likes you, makes your life easier,” A chuckle scrapped out of his throat, “You know how fragile they can be! One smack and they’ll just crack -”

“Stan,” Ben said, horror bleeding into his face. Empathy. He had no poker face.

No. nonono, that’s not how that goes. Ben should know better. Ben was going to get them in trouble. He was going to get them *caught*.

“What? Were you keeping him a secret?” Stan slouched sheepishly with a matching grin as his nails made bloody crescents along his palms, “I get it, I get it, don’t wanna let any ladies know about him. The boy ones are weird, right? Be easier if you could just f - “

Ben grabbed Stan’s arm with a force that matched his build but not his disposition. He hauled him away from the doors, and towards a corner of the entry pavilion. The whole area was littered with artificial flowers and soft white cone lighting. Nothing that would set

off a budding Sentinel who didn't know how to tune their sensory input.

Stan was pushed just shy of a shove onto a granite bench. Ben stood above him, towered over him, and Stan's airway shut. He didn't - he didn't know what was going to happen here. Ben looked enraged, possessed, and Stan didn't know how to handle that side of him. It didn't seem possible for Ben, to be this angry.

"Ben -"

"- *Don't*. Just," The violent shadow over Ben's eyes fell away as an exhausted sigh fell out of him. He collapsed on the bench next to Stan, giant shoulders falling like buildings around him. Stan didn't know a man that large could be so small. Stan didn't like this side of Ben either, who wasn't a threat but... looked so hurt. Looked destroyed. Stan wanted to reach out, to help.

There was no pull in his ribs, no tug in his chest to do it. He and Ben weren't compatible, at least not enough. He just... wanted to help Ben because he's *Ben*. Kind, sweet, oddly but not unwelcomely adorable.

Sentinel Ben Hanscom.

Stan put a hand on his shoulder, no real skin contact with all their layers, but Ben seemed to relax. Not eased, but calmer.

"Do..." Ben didn't cut him off, let Stan get himself there. Decide for himself, "Do you want me to?"

Ben looked at him with a smile that didn't match the worry in his eyes, "Nah. It's okay. I don't want you to risk anything for me,"

But you've risked so much for me.

"We aren't," He didn't want to be too clear on his words, too incriminating, "We aren't really a good set up. You're not my type," Stan winked for effect, but Ben seemed to understand.

"I don't own you," He lamented, but his words held weight, "You can do what you'd like,"

Stan blinked at that wording. At how... Sentinel that made Stan sound. "I don't own you either. I wouldn't do something to do you without your permission, that's -"

"If you want," Ben said again, "Only if you want."

Stan did want, Stan wanted so bad. To help Ben, to ease him, to just... let Ben feel like Ben again. Ben let his head droop, like an offering of privacy as Stan's palm slid slowly up Ben's shoulder until the tips of his fingers, stained with pink from his gouged palms, brushed the hairs along Ben's nape. He smoothed out until his palm cupped along the vertebrae and gripped firmly. He gave Ben a little shake and, "It's gonna be alright," for appearances but could feel the way Ben's spine unlocked beneath his trembling hand.

They weren't compatible. It wasn't strong. Not a push but a nudge. It still felt right. Felt like what he should do. Ben seemed to think so too, not hazy like Richie would be but sharp and clear eyes. He looked up at Stan from beneath his fringe with the first genuine smile all morning. Stan smiled back.

He felt flushed. He felt giddy. He felt alive.

They just smiled at each other long after Stan moved his hand back to his pocket. It was comfortable, to have a friend like Ben. It almost felt like what could've been with Bill. Someone who knew what he was, could easily benefit from what he was, but chose silence and risk for the sake of no one but Stan. Who allowed Stan to choose to help him. Who didn't expect Stan to simply because Stan was genetically capable.

Someone who didn't even ask Stan to, but allowed Stan the step of offering.

An silly laugh passed between them, compatible only in the sense of caring for each other. There was no attraction between them, but there was trust. Now more than ever. Stan chose to ride this inexplicably *bright* high instead of lingering on how he'd eased someone on a public street not twenty yards from a prison designed just for him. It didn't look any different than cheering up a friend, and Stan let himself be calm. Be in the moment. He could spare a

moment.

Once Ben seemed to resettle into his bones, Stan asked softly, "Do you want to talk about it?" He didn't know if Ben *had* anything to talk about, but people usually did when they made a face like Ben had.

"I haven't seen him," Ben answered, scratching his beard thoughtlessly, "54495. I came in for a - a session," He looked apologetically to Stan but Stan just nodded for him to continue, "They put me in a room with a kid, like an actual kid. They didn't even look twelve. They called her *promising* and *workable*. Like she was a better fit since she was impressionable. She didn't look scared of me, of the whole thing. I can't tell if that's worse."

"Lots of kids are raised to expect it. To welcome it,"

"Yeah, I guess that works sometimes," Ben sighed, scratching harder, "But I asked for him. Over and over I asked for him. I thought he'd been paired off. He was always too... unpredictable to be sent out. They called him fussy,"

"Bet he loved that," Stan intoned.

"Oh yeah," Ben huffed, a weary laugh echoing out of him, "He was - is a fighter. He's strong. Strongest person I've ever seen. Anyway, I wouldn't go with the kid, wouldn't let her near me. It felt wrong. So they finally just said they were 'working with him.' Managing his temper. And who knows what the fuck that means."

Stan didn't like any possibility of what that could mean for 54495.

He said instead, "Well you said it yourself, he's tough. He'll be fine. Are you going to see him now?"

"I was gonna try, yeah," Ben said, "I've been here all week but every day he's unavailable. I said I wanted to bid on him."

The sound of that, even from Ben, made Stan's stomach turn, "I thought it was a waitlist,"

"It is, but you can bid," Ben looked nauseas himself, "It's not like an

auction,” He paused, seemed to think it over, and didn’t bother to continue that defence, “You have to make a case on why you want them. What your benefit will be. It involves a lot of loops and money and a dem... a demonstration of your control.”

“What does that mean?” Stan muttered.

“I don’t know, they’re deliberately vague. But it isn’t good. A lot of people don’t do it, the application cost alone is insane, but I’m worried about him. I’m really fucking worried.”

“Well,” Stan began, “Go see him. I’m sure he misses you.”

“I really don’t think he gives a shit about me,” Ben laughed, voice soft.

“You’re probably the only good thing about his life right now,” Stan admitted, “He probably needs you.”

“But, I’m - “

“You’re Ben. The nicest, probably hairiest, person around. I don’t know what happens in there. But if he can even smile at you for a second then you’re the best thing he’s got. And you shouldn’t take that away from him,” Stan gripped Ben’s neck again, a firm hold that Ben leaned into. He nodded at Stan, and hauled off of the bench with a sigh. The Center cast a shadow over them both, but Ben stared it down. A tower facing a tower, Stan couldn’t imagine standing that tall.

“What were you doing over here anyway?” Ben asked, turning back to him with a quirked brow.

“I needed birdseed before seven in the morning,”

“Yeah, alright, that checks out,” Ben laughed. He nodded and Stan nodded back.

Stan sat on the smooth, textureless stone. He watched Ben walk confidently into The Center. The impossibly tall glass doors sealed behind him and he blended seamlessly into the sea of pewter.

He looked up at The Center. Looked above the ten floors of glass greenhouse paneling and lush greenery with smooth white interiors to where the slate began. The walls with no windows, no way to tell just how many floors there were. Betty was in those walls. 54495 was in those walls.

Stan wasn't in those walls. Not yet. Not fucking yet.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, snapped out of his trance, he pulled it out to a text from Beverly.

If you're late I'm gonna assume you died. Five minutes, Uris.

Stan checked the time. 6:56, "Shit," Stan muttered, taking off down the street. He'd get birdseed on his break. He could take an extra five minutes for his lunch. Mike would forgive him after pretending to scold him and Beverly would make a joke that he was finally cool. It wasn't the end of the world.

Stan's life began to fall apart around one in the afternoon.

He hadn't had much of a grip on it before; but he'd had a desperate cling to normalcy that carried him twelve years across state lines and into a fragile bubble.

But.

Nonetheless.

The morning had started smoothly enough. Stan was seven minutes late and even with frantically texting Beverly that he was, in fact, not dead; he was greeted with Beverly pouring out an icee for, "My homie, Uris, be respectful. This is a wake."

Stan told her to clean it up, so Beverly ordered some poor kid named Sage to do it.

“You’re not the manager,” Sage insisted.

“Don’t play that game,” Stan called as he went down the hall, “She’ll fight you,” Stan didn’t know if Beverly would actually fight her; but it was best not to tempt fate.

Stan hadn’t met anyone on The Falcon team beyond Bev and Mike and he intended to keep it that way. The resounding *click* of the latch behind him felt right, all the noises around him muffled away through insulated and padded walls. The films were one after the other; for the first time since being employed, Stan was actually busy. It was cathartic in a way, mindless work alone with too much to do to feel lonely.

He’d warned Richie about the festival. It wasn’t incredibly well advertised, but it was a horror special so that always drew crowds. Richie probably didn’t want to deal with actual human beings beyond ones who were paid to be there. So there was no reason to go downstairs when everything he’d need was within five feet of him.

Things went smoothly enough, only one jammed reel and a few spills the coworkers Beverly was suddenly commanding had to clean with minimal complaints. Stan even found a moment to look up a pet store that had the birdseed Piper liked.

Stan sat on his stool as two movies played on either side of him. The whirring of the projectors felt soothing, like a white noise. He nearly dozed off just as *The Shining* was wrapping up in Theatre B.

Stan felt his phone go off in his pocket and braced himself for whatever meme Beverly had found in the ten minutes since she’d texted him last.

Come downstairs

It was vague, misspelled, and had no punctuation. Stan nearly threw the floorboard door open.

Beverly was pacing in front of the concessions table. She had her jacket on and was nearly gnawing on a cigarette she was barely keeping herself from lighting indoors. Stan skidded to a halt at the

joint between the hallway and the lobby. She looked off. Wrong. Something was wrong.

She looked up at him, her eyes wide, mouth tight. She was holding his jacket. Stan didn't step forward, feet sinking into the faded carpet beneath him.

"Stan!" She barked, cracked voice ricocheting across the walls. A few people looked. Stan's knees locked. Beverly never drew attention to herself like this, she never drew attention to Stan.

"Wh... what's going on?"

"Ben's in the hospital. We need to go," She finally marched up to him, gripping his arm like Ben had done hours ago, "Now."

"Ben? What? I just," Ben had been fine that morning. Stan had made him fine. Stan had *helped*.

"Right now, Stan!" She snapped, no warmth in her tone as she pushed them forward, "I can't drive, you have to, Stan, *focus*. We need to go," Her hands were violently trembling, her whole body shook. A horrible blend of dread and adrenaline coursed through her. She wouldn't make it around the block before crashing them both.

Drive. Stan didn't know how to drive Beverly's motorcycle, "I don't know how, I can't,"

"Shit," Beverly spit, now in the brisk air of the sidewalk. Stan yanked his jacket on, barely having the second sleeve on before Beverly was tugging them towards the corner, "We'll - we'll, fuck, I don't,"

"Mike has a car -"

"- He's the one who called me, he's already there,"

She was scrambling, completely rattled at being caught on the sidelines of a crisis. She'd been collected when Betty had been taken because she was in the moment, adapting, ready. She had no power here, she was helpless.

Ben was in the hospital. Ben was in the hospital and it was bad.

"Taxi," Stan blurted, "Taxi to the hospital. I'll pay. I need," He pat his pockets, he'd left his wallet in the projection room, "I need to grab it, I'll - I'll, just call -"

"- Are you guys okay?"

Stan and Beverly whipped their heads around to see Richie standing at the corner. He looked more than a little concerned, eyes searching for their own and keys halfway -

Keys.

"Drive us to the hospital," Stan said, moving more into Richie's space than he had ever dared before, "Please,"

"What? Are you hurt? What's -"

"- Ben, we need to go see Ben," Beverly begged.

"Who is *Ben*?" Richie asked, but was already following Stan before using his unreasonably long legs to jump ahead and lead the way. The car was discreet, simple, black. A jeep that wasn't old but not anything close to a top of the line model. The windows were so tinted Stan wondered how he'd see out of them.

They peeled out of Richie's crooked parallel spot and took off down the road. Beverly was shouting directions, Richie was shouting not to shout, Stan was muttering half apologies but also shouting when Richie nearly slammed into cars.

Stan wasn't sure Richie had any better idea of who Ben was by the time Beverly and him had dove out of the car before it had fully stopped. There was a young woman at the front desk, her hair was curly and messy, she smiled politely when they approached her, but it twitched when she caught their expressions.

"Hi, my name is Emma. How can I help you?"

"Ben Hanscom," Beverly rushed, "We're looking for Ben Hanscom,"

"Okay, well let's see," Her demeanor was unnervingly calm, methodical, unfazed by their flushed faces and twitching limbs, "Oh,

dear, okay. Well, Mr. Hanscom is in SDR right now.”

“What is that?” Stan asked, looking between Beverly and Emma.

“Sensory Deprivation Recovery,” She answered, voice just a sweet, “It’s a cataclysm that holds Mr. Hanscom until he is normalized out to stable levels. He’s been in there for a few hours now,”

Beverly looked sick. Stan felt nausea clawing up his windpipe, “Can we see him?”

“Well he can’t see you,” She giggled, but her face pinked at her own comment, “Y’know, it’s - I’m so sorry. Yes, you can go up to floor 14. Take a right. You can’t go into the room but there’s a waiting area,”

The two took off before she could scramble up a better apology. The elevator shot up, open design plan showing them the skyline of the city below. Beverly was white knuckling the handrail, Stan kept his hand gently around her wrist. He couldn’t ease her, but he hoped the sentiment was still there.

Mike greeted them in the waiting room, a sparse but lavish room full of soft chairs and tablets instead of magazines. An aquarium wall separated off a playroom with intricate but silent wooden and metal toys. It was clearly a Sentinel only wing. Stan felt an itch along his neck, a suffocating grip that had nothing to do with Ben.

A soft, “You okay, Stan?” Cut through his stifling thoughts.

“Yeah,” He answered, throat tight, “What’s wrong? What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. I just, I’m his emergency contact but his stuff wasn’t on him when he was taken to the hospital. He’s been in there for three hours,”

“So they’re just leaving him in the dark? Are there any actual doctors involved in this holistic bullshit?” Beverly hissed.

“You’re not going to find better doctors than the ones who get put here,” Mike mumbled, “Most important patients and all that. It’s a sensory issue, they said. They won’t tell me what happened since I’m

not family but it's something that requires him to restabilize,”

Stan froze. Eyes wide as he listened. Had he done this? They weren't compatible; what if he couldn't help people he didn't fit. Oh god, oh god.

He couldn't say it here. He bit his cheek until it swelled against molars in revolt. Beverly pulled him close and the three sat in a row.

There was a pull cord on the wall across from them. A thin red and black laced cord that stood stark against the dove gray walls. The label above it was just a g. Stan wondered where they kept them. If they were locked away behind hidden wall panels or forced to kneel under desks until the cord was pulled and they were dragged out to serve and assist. Stan wondered if they were paid like any other nurse.

Probably not.

Stan closed his eyes instead. Letting the soft bristles and curls of Mike and Beverly's hair brush his cheeks as they huddled.

They waited.

At half past noon a doctor came to see them. He was tall, nearing his fifties, and wore the same gray that covered every surface. On his left shoulder were the embroidered letters g H , there was text next to it, but Stan couldn't make that out from where he stood. He looked tired, haggard, and every alarm in Stan's mind went off. Ben was, Ben was -

“Mr. Hanscom is resting in the next room,” He said, “We removed him from SDR several minutes ago and did standard testing for sensitivity. He is on oxygen, but able to accept visitors,”

“Yes, please,” Beverly said, already starting towards the door.

“If you'd like to see Mr. Hanscom we ask that you abide by SDR reacclimation procedures,” A nurse approached with three smocks, slippers, and medical masks. All of it was a soft pewter gray, “We can't overwhelm him with things too loud, be that auditory, smell, or visual. Please put these on and we can take you to see him.”

The nurse briskly passed out the uniforms, but lingered on Stan. He glanced up at her to see her coyly biting her lip, a shy twinkle in her eyes. Stan flickered a smile back, and looked away. Her nursing tag read Bella Fernandez. Just below was the same embroidery, but much clearer.

guide
Handler

Stan didn't make eye contact with her again. Beverly wrapped an arm around his waist, and she eventually walked away. Beverly squeezed, and let him go with a knowing look. Better to let her huff off with rejection than linger with suspicion.

Ben's hospital suite, because room was a gross understatement, was larger than Stan's entire apartment. The machines were embedded into the wall to create a smooth, open, easy to process environment.

Ben, however, was not easy to process. His eyes were sunken deep into his skull, deep rings forming beneath them. He looked pale, and shaken, and Stan couldn't see *what* was actually wrong with him. He had nearly every machine possible hooked up to him, but nothing seemed to jump out as, there! There's the problem! Ben just looked... broken.

Broken but awake as he turned to look at the three of them. His eyes looked pooled with blood as broken vessels freckled around his iris. The oxygens looping tubes framed them, like a morbid painting. They approached him slowly, smiling behind their obscuring masks.

"Wh -" Ben began to cough violently. Beverly rushed to his side with a pitch from the table and held the cup while he drank. Once he took his fill, he let his head drop back against the pillows. Swallowing once, twice, he finally croaked, "What the fuck are you wearing?"

A hesitant giggle slipped out of Mike, filtered through his mask. The whole cotton cover lifted with his grinning cheeks and Stan felt himself laughing too. The three of them nearly shed their uniforms, but decided against it. They didn't want to get kicked out.

"What happened, buddy?" Mike asked.

Ben flinched, a rage sinewing through his veins as multiple monitors went off behind him. Stan looked around alarmed, but the beeping relented as Ben breathed. It took a little while for him to recover, but he finally said, "They got him,"

Stan knew who *him* was, the only *him* Ben ever talked about, "What did they do?" He whispered.

"I don't know," Ben wheezed, but there was a wet clog to his throat now, overlaying the scratch from before, "But he, he..." He turned to Stan, looked him right in the eyes as tears pooled at the seam of his oxygen tubes and skin, "He can't talk."

No one spoke. No one moved.

"Was he just hurt?" Beverly offered, "Sick, maybe? You said he's small, he might just not be eating enough,"

"They did it," Ben heaved a ragged breath, machines starting to go off once more, "They finally *managed* him, the *fuckers* ,"

"Ben," Mike soothed, "Ben you need to calm down. Please, Ben. Stan -" He turned to Stan before seeming to catch himself, "Please help me, tell Ben to calm down."

Stan wouldn't dare to try and ease him in this setting, but he still sat on the edge of the bed beside Mike. Beverly walked around to the other side, hands running through Ben's hair as he tried to keep himself from sinking or worse.

"Don't let them put me in that again," Ben suddenly demanded, "It's hell, it's absolute hell, and they don't let you out until you're unconscious."

That sounded... inhumane. That sounded like something they'd do to guides, not their prodigal flock. But Ben's panic couldn't be ignored. He didn't push, but Stan nudged just enough. Ben slowly came back to himself. Stan couldn't offer him the luxury of more help. Mike and Beverly both kept their eyes off him, like they didn't notice and continued to comfort Ben. They couldn't risk anything that would interest any possible surveillance.

“Can you still bid for him?” Stan asked and Mike and Bev looked at him for that, question in their eyes, “Could you bring him home?” Saying *save him* would be considered politically incorrect.

Ben laughed hollowly, eyes on the ceiling. The blank empty ceiling.

“He’s the reason I’m here,” Ben choked, “They’re gonna kill him.”

“People don’t kill guides,” Beverly insisted.

“But they might kill rogues,” Ben said, “Especially one that tries to kill a Sentinel.”

A buzz that was more of a tinkling hum cut into the room, “Mr. Hanscom?” The walls seemed to speak, “There’s a Mr. Richard Tozier here to see you.”

“... The SNL guy?” Ben asked incredulously.

“I’ll deal with it,” Beverly promised, and tugged her mask down to kiss Ben’s head before tugging Mike out after her, “We’ll be right back,”

The door clicked shut behind them. Stan looked back to Ben.

“She means the SNL guy, right?”

Stan snorted, “Yeah, uh, he’s a patron,”

“Yeah, sure,” Ben wheezed, “That checks out,”

“How do you know he did it?” Stan asked, voice low and easy, “I mean, what even did happen?”

“Asphyxiation,” Ben said quietly, “He uh, I don’t know if you could call it easing, but; he made me stop breathing,”

“Jesus, Ben,”

“He was sad. He was just,” Ben shrugged as his lip trembled, “They brought him in with a bag over his head. No contact or interaction since the ‘procedure.’ He was so fucking sad. I could feel it. He was, I

don't know what they did but he was so upset and scared and I thought - he's gone. They broke him. They finally did it. And he looked at me and this, this rage came over him. And I just stopped breathing. And even when they were shocking him and beating him he didn't stop.

"And I know he tried to kill me but I don't think he even was trying to kill *me* . Just, anything. He wanted to do something. All the guards are Leveled, and he probably weighs eighty pounds, so he can't touch them. But, me, he could hurt me. So I just,"

"You didn't stop him?" Stan murmured.

"I figured I should let him. I felt like I owed him that. I always egged him on; pushed him to smile or snap at me. Just anything I could so he'd seem alive. I did this to him -"

"- He's his own person," Stan cut in, whispering adamantly, "You don't own him. You never did. He made his own decisions. This wasn't your fault and it wasn't his."

"He stopped himself," Ben said, "He could've killed me. But he didn't. He started to cry, he'd never cried before."

"He was brave," Stan said. Past tense felt more appropriate.

"He really was - is - I... he just cried and stopped and. I think he was screaming. He was trying. But no sound came out."

They didn't say anything more. Let that hang between them. Ben didn't deserve that guilt. He shouldn't have to carry that weight.

The thought of the boy with a bag over his head and no voice made Stan hold Ben's knee harder. Ben placed his own hand over Stan's.

The door slid open once more to Beverly and Richie standing in the doorway. Richie looked about four inches too tall for the smock. Ben's snort at the sight nearly made Stan weep.

"Those Kinky Briefcase sketches were good," Ben said.

Richie barked a laugh that made them both wince, “They ended up overplaying it. I’m, uh, Richie,”

“So I’ve heard,” Ben smiled, and pushed Stan’s hand off his knee, “Go, I wanna talk to Bev. Entertain the entertainer,”

“He was a chauffeur today, actually,” Beverly cut in, taking Stan’s place on the bed.

The door closed behind him and Richie pulled the mask off before bouncing on his heels. After a moment he said, “That coffee date still stand?”

Stan blinked, “I don’t remember saying it was a date,”

“Yeah, well, I hate hospitals and you need a distraction so let’s go drink shitty hospital coffee while I smoke,”

“Romantic,” Stan quipped, but the flush rose to his cheeks despite himself.

“Yeah, I’m a real catch,” He stopped once he saw Stan watching the door, “Hey, he’s gonna be okay. Bev scared a nurse until she told her what the deal was in layman’s terms. Ben is gonna be outta here tomorrow morning. She wants you to step out, get fresh air, away from people and monitors and needles,” He tapped his elbow against Stan’s own with a wink, “This is practically an arranged marriage, don’t dishonor your Beverly now,”

They found a vending machine and both grabbed a coffee, then headed out to a small park; well, more of a patch of grass next to an A/C unit. Close enough.

“Can’t smoke in the real park,” Stan said as they perched on the raised edge of the street.

“Yeah, yeah,” Richie bemoaned, “Ethics and all that,” He lit his cigarette and took a deep drag.

Stan looked at the smock still hanging off his shoulders, “You know you can take that off, right?”

“Eh, I think it’s flattering, shows off my exposed calves,” He took another drag, “I’m supposed to meet with my agent later. He wants me to quit, so maybe this’ll absorb all the smoke and I’ll be scot free,”

“Smoke clings to hair too,”

"I'm supposed to meet him at two, what time is it now?"

Stan pulled out his phone, "Almost one."

“Well, shit, gimme a shave, Stanley,” Richie laughed a bit at Stan’s *bzzzz* in response, “Maybe I’ll just bail, he’s a handful,” The cigarette was stubbed out onto the pavement, “Wants me more focused, working harder, booking more,”

“Well maybe you just need a break?” Stan offered, “He can’t accept that?”

“Nah, Chase doesn’t make money unless I do. Chase the agent not Chase the bank. Maybe he uses Chase though, Chase at Chase bank. What a rollercoaster,”

“That doesn’t sound like a word anymore,” Stan said.

“Well of course not, he’s a person and/or bank.”

Stan choked on his coffee, smacking Richie on the arm. Richie pushed his shoulder against him, and Stan pushed back. Stan didn’t move away. Richie didn’t either. The two sat, holding their steaming paper cups, Stan’s cheek resting against Richie’s shoulder. Richie’s chin grazing the top of his curls. Knees knocking just slightly.

“Stan, I -”

“- Richie Tozier!” Some yelled, just across the one way street, coming around a fence with an enormous camera.

“Shit,” Richie hissed, but before either could react a blinding flash went off.

“What are you doing at the hospital?! Why are you in scrubs Richie?! Finally overdose?!” The questions were as fast as they were brutal,

shutter clicking rapidly as unfiltered white strobed in front of them. A few more joined a moment later, surrounding them. They weren't on hospital property here, no security was going to come.

"Who is this?!"

"Where have you been?!"

"Look here! Look here! One picture! C'mon, Richie!"

Richie flinched away from a flash and crushed his coffee in his hands. Stan watched in horror as the scalding liquid poured down his arm. How Richie yelped, then then blinked, then didn't move.

He was completely under.

The flashes didn't stop but the questions changed.

"What's wrong?!"

"Are you dead?! Did he die?!"

"Is he a Sentinel?!"

Stan jolted into action at the last one, throwing his own coffee at the nearest camera. When the man collapsed back with a shout, Stan yanked Richie out of the huddle after him. The cameras followed until Stan's feet hit the polished concrete beyond the grass and yelled, "Hospital! Private property! Fuck off!"

He turned a corner, Richie practically floating beside him, and hugged a wall as a nurse walked briskly by. What did he do? What can he do?

Turn Richie over? Leave him in the ER lobby? Call for help like Beverly had with Greta? Too many choices were flying through his head, none good. None fair. None of this was *fair*.

"S-Stanl..." Richie keened, hardly a word. Stan looked up at him, at his watering, scared, empty eyes.

Stan found a closet, crammed to the brim with cleaning supplies and

disinfectant. He pushed Richie to the ground, back to a corner, and tried to kneel between his legs. The other boy's knee's dug into the shelving beside them, too unaware to adjust himself out of discomfort. Stan threw his own legs around Richie's limp ones. Straddling his waist as he cradled his face.

"C'mon, Richie," His voice soft as prayer, "Come back,"

A soft groan answered him.

"That's it, you're doing great. C'mon, Richie," He pressed his forehead against Richie's own, "Come back to me,"

Slowly but surely, Richie began to blink. First two slow falls of his lids that would hardly rise again. Then more, almost a flutter. It felt like ages until light finally returned to his eyes, but when they did he only looked at Stan.

The tug in Stan's ribs felt fuller, expanding in his chest to fill empty gaps. Richie stared at him with nothing short of wonder. Stan stared back.

Stan's life began to fall apart.

"It's you," Richie gasped, "It's been you the whole time."

Notes for the Chapter:

yeah, so uh, yikes.

9. ublažiti

Stan had been twelve when Bill had fallen. He'd gone home once the sun had risen to tell his mom. She'd held him as she'd called the police and then the Denbrough's.

She'd asked him why he hadn't called the police first. Or gone to the station; it was on the path back home anyway. Stan didn't answer. He hardly moved.

"Shock," Officer Gardener had said, "The boy's in shock. Give him a few hours, he'll be fine."

They hadn't worried about Bill. Not at first. He was clearly a Sentinel after all. Tough kid like that? He was probably sunbathing on the rocks. Gave his buddy a scare for kicks.

It had taken fishing his chilled body from the eastern bank to finally set a panic in their bones. Stan had been there when they found him. They insisted on him pointing out where he'd fallen, ignored when Stan mumbled he hadn't seen.

Bill had never looked smaller. Never looked more frail.

He'd looked like his father.

Empty eyes boring into Stan's own. The police had tried to hide him, *spare him* from the sight. But Stan had seen. He'd seen what he'd done. How he'd let Bill sink.

Stan didn't know why that came to mind now, trapped in Richie's lap as the boy's eyes widened as big as Bill's. Boring into his own.

But Richie could still speak. Richie could sink them both.

"No," Stan whispered, still unable to look away from Richie's wide gaze, "No, I -"

"- It's been you this whole time, how did I not..."

Stan shook his head violently. He tried to get off of Richie's lap, away

from the haze between them, “Salts, I used smelling salts, I’m not -”

Richie’s hand shot and grabbed Stan’s wrist, “Where? Where are they?” His grip was firm but not cruel.

“Please, Richie, you don’t understand,” His tone began to warp into a plea, “I’m not - I’m *not*, fuck,”

“But you are,” Richie’s eyes flicked between his own, unable to settle, trying to process, “You’re a g -”

“No!” Stan’s voice screeched out, a strangled whisper that echoed in the cramped room. Richie’s voice was stolen from him, taken by Stan’s demand.

But Richie was aware of it now. Stan could see the jerking of his jaw as the fought to speak.

“Okay,” Richie finally wheezed, teeth clenched not of his own volition, “I’m sorry,”

A sob bubbled up in Stan, pitiful and mourning. He’d messed this up. He’d found a way to ruin this little circle he’d made. Richie needed to forget him, there wasn’t another option, Stan didn’t have any other way .

you don’t know me

“No, Stan, no,” Richie gulped, features spasming, scrunching, as if he could force the thoughts out, “Stop it,”

you don’t remember me

“St... “ He hesitated on his name, panic striking his features, “Stanley, please -”

you don’t r e m e m b e

“Fuck’s sake, *stop*, ” Richie spit, pressing their foreheads together, a mirror of minutes before; when Stan had done the same, “Please don’t leave me alone,”

Stan faltered, the sweat of Richie's brow pressed against his curls. The hands in his hair didn't feel controlling, but scared. Tears swam behind coke bottle lenses.

"Please," Richie gasped, unable to gather his thoughts despite Stan freeing his hold over him, "I don't own you. You don't have to stay, I promise, just - don't make me forget you again,"

"I haven't," Stan began, empty denial on reflex.

"You *have* , I know you have, I can feel it," Richie keened, "Like a hole in my chest, I could feel something missing, something erased. I just - please. I don't want to forget you. Don't make me."

"I won't," Stan whispered, the tears rising in his own eyes once more, "I won't, I'm sorry,"

"Don't be sorry," Richie said, voice clogged, "You did what you had to do,"

"I didn't know you," Stan insisted, "I was - I didn't mean to,"

"And now?" Richie asked. He pulled back only enough that their eyes could meet. Stan was helpless to avoid it, "What happens now?"

"I don't -"

"I won't decide for you," Richie said, "I can't. You just tell me what you need me to do,"

Stan didn't know what he needed him to do. Too many emotions were mixing with too many outcomes. He had fallen so far off his path, off his dependent route; they were free falling now. Richie, beyond a few shuddered breaths, was silent. Patient. Uninfluential on Stan's decision.

Except he was the influence. He was the domino that had caused all of this. Stan could scream at him. Could hit him.

Could stop his breath. Ease the shuddering lungs into petrification. He'd done it before.

The thought of Richie with those eased eyes dutifully suffocating filled Stan's stomach with lead.

"I'm not," Stan began, his mantra the only thing he could be sure of, "I'm not a guide,"

It sounded weak on his tongue.

"You're Stanley Uris," Richie answered. Like that was enough. Like that could be enough.

"And you're Richie Tozier," Stan said, letting his forehead fall against Richie's once more. A soft thump of sweaty curls and worried brows. His hands found Richie's tangled hair, threading his fingers through the messy locks. He tugged just enough to get Richie's eyes to focus again. A smile settled on the boy's face, wiry and crooked. Stan tugged again. Richie huffed something teetering on a laugh as a shiver ran through him.

"Stop," Richie wheezed, "You're killin' me, Stanley," Stan tugged again, just to hear the laugh. It was a lot breathier that time, "I swear to god, Uris -"

Stan laughed at that, a creaky wheeze squeezing through his panic, deflating him into a heap in Richie's arms. It didn't feel safe, but it felt sheltered. Stan supposed that could be enough for now.

"See?" Richie begged, "It's okay. We're okay. I promise."

It felt childish, almost idiotic, but Stan leaned further against him with a soft, "... Promise?"

The chuckle brushed his curls, rustling them against a ruddy and salt tracked cheek as Richie huffed, "Yeah, babe. Promise," The arms around him tightened, "But we gotta get the fuck outta here, okay?"

"Yeah, that seems smart," Stan mumbled, adrenaline crashing as he tried to right himself on his own two legs. He didn't remember it being this hard to move before. A shiver quickly became a near wracking tremble in his limbs, "Sorry," Stan fumbled, "I -"

Richie hoisted them both up. His legs weren't much better off, but a

look of determination had set into his jaw. Stan had seen him trip over his own sneakers twice in a ten foot distance before. On more than one occasion. But that Richie seemed erased. His eyes were blown wide, but not vacant, aware but not overwhelmed. Steady, assured, powerful.

A true Sentinel if Stan had ever seen one.

A panic filled him for a second. A gnawing need to scramble away, to filter through the hospital hallways into obscurity once more. A nose and the rim of too large glasses dug against his temple.

The panic left.

Maybe he really was in shock now. His weight slumped against Richie's wiry frame, hands fisting the pilled cotton of his hoodie. Richie's forehead found his own once more, the height difference skewed the angle. Richie's shoulders hunched to meet him, and Stan nearly went on his toes to accommodate. But, despite the bleach like smell and claustrophobic space, neither fidgeted.

Footsteps echoed past them, stopping at the door. Stan shot away from Richie. Neither dared to take a breath. The knob turned, casting a harsh fluorescent gleam across them both.

The figure was obscured, face shadowed as Stan blinked away spots. A thousand explanations crawled in his throat, but none could make it past his choked tongue. There was nowhere to run.

"Jesus fuck, are you serious?"

A boy who couldn't be more than twenty came into focus, mild acne freckled across his irked brow. He was a beanpole. His ID picture showed a goofy smile, Quinn written in block letters over whatever first name had been there before. He stared at them both, face twisting further into frustration.

"There are so many beds and you two have to fuck in a closet?" He groaned, shouldering past them into the stuffed room as he continued, "What a fuckin' cliché, they're gonna make me mop that shit up. Perverts fucking in hospi-" Two packs of toilet paper in hand,

Quinn rounded on them, "This isn't gonna be a threeway, get the fuck out!"

Richie jumped into motion, hands gripping Stan's shoulders to scoot them out of the janitor's warpath. The two hugged the far wall and watched Quinn pointedly lock the door behind him with a nearly comical rage.

"Unsanitary," He spit, "Fuck in a shower like decent people."

Stan watched him take off down the hall, rounding a corner without another word. A chuckle bubbled out of Richie, spilling into a nearly hysterical laugh. Stan was too stunned to answer.

"Good to know he fucks in a shower," Richie wheezed.

"Sounds like he needs to get fucked in a shower," Stan muttered. Richie's laugh started up again. Stan was shocked to see him almost look... choked up.

"God, you're amazing," Richie said. Stan flushed. He didn't know how to answer that.

Instead he ducked his head, just slightly - no raising suspicion, and took Richie's wrist in his hand. He tugged them along what Stan had hoped was the exit. The front route felt too obvious now, and they couldn't go back the way they'd come with all those photographers. The building was massive, there had to be another exit somewhere. Stan didn't let his pace speed up to match his running thoughts, but his hand gripped Richie's wrist tighter.

Richie wiggled in his grip and Stan let go with a, "Sorry," But was met with Richie's warm palm cupping his own. Their fingers weren't laced, but Richie's grip was steady enough.

"C'mon," Richie hummed, long legs keeping an easy pace, "Let's just ask for help,"

"But, we -"

"Nothing off about asking for help when you're lost," Richie offered, "Don't you think it'd look weirder to wander in random directions

with that look on your face?”

Stan paused and looked at Richie. Richie met his gaze openly, a nervous smile on his face. He was waiting for Stan to agree or not. He wasn't going to make the decision for them. It was almost alarming how Richie did not change considering the circumstances. The most adaptable person Stan had ever seen. At Stan's nod, Richie took the lead. Not walking ahead of him, but guiding them both to the nearest help desk.

“Hi... Rosie,” Richie said, self deprecating smile in place as he sheepishly scratched his neck, “This place is massive and I can't figure out how to get back to my car,”

“No problem,” The nurse chirped, a sweet look on her face as she looked at them both, “Parking Lot B is back towards your left at the end of pediatrics. Lot A is that same hallway, but take another left to the corner elevator,”

“Thank you,” Richie laughed, “I figured we were gonna have to admit ourselves here if we didn't make it before dinner,”

She laughed like a bell, “The food isn't worth that. Anything else I can help with?”

“Nope,” Richie smiled, “Thanks a bunch. Have a good one!”

“You too!”

Stan let Richie walk him to wherever he'd been parked. They took the long way to Lot A, and walked through the maze of cars back to Lot B. The curb where they'd sat was just outside of the garage. Richie hopped into the car and waited for Stan to do the same. Stan considered getting into the seat behind him. Keeping distance. He climbed into shotgun.

A shadow came over Richie's expression once they were two lights away from the hospital, soft grey walls retreating in the rearview. Stan didn't like that look on Richie's face, but he knew it well enough. He watched Richie's eyes dart to every building, noticing every street camera and Patrol Kiosk in a way he definitely hadn't

before. A map of traps opened in his peripherals, a carefully designed landscape to capture and detain rogues. There was nowhere they could go that was inherently safe.

Richie may have found something in Stan, but there wasn't a happy ending for his new realization. No chance meeting ending in wondrous fate.

Stan knew it; but he couldn't help but wish Richie didn't have to

"So what happens now?" He asked. Richie didn't answer for a long moment. A pregnant pause between them as each worked through their own choices.

Stan didn't really need to. All of his variables depended on Richie. It was a little terrifying how much that didn't worry him.

"Where do you want to go?" Richie asked instead, "What do I... What do I need to do?"

Stan snorted, "There's nothing to *do* in this situation. I," He paused, the crestfallen look on Richie's face was almost wounding, "How about somewhere you go when you hide?"

Richie looked at him confused.

"Somewhere when you need to get away. Where does a famous person go to hide out?"

Richie looked back to the street, a considering frown on his face. Stan watched him work through it before Richie cracked a sigh. He smiled sheepishly, "Usually The Falcon," He offered, "I mean, beside the cute projectionist, it's sorta a dud."

Stan laughed, "Heard that guy's a dick,"

"Nah," Richie shrugged, "Just a little shy, I think. Judgmental of drink choices though,"

They fell into a silence, sitting at an endless red light. The traffic was too locked up, they wouldn't make it through for at least two rotations. Stan needed to... do something. But Stan didn't have an

exit strategy for 'get photographed with a mid level celebrity.'

"We could go back to my place," Richie offered, "I mean, we don't have to, but it's got locks on the door and no one really knows I live there."

"Yeah," Stan agreed, "That works. I need to get Piper though,"

"We can pick her up if you want," Richie said finally through the light, "Or I can -" Richie's phone went off, the trill filling the car through the speakers. *Chase Hanson* lit up across the touch screen console, "Ah, shit, hang on," He held a finger to his lips before accepting the call.

"Richie! My man! Where the fuck are you?"

"Chase," Richie laughed, drawing the name out with a lilt, "Who could say where anyone is ever?"

"That's hilarious, I love it, but we had a meeting? Remember? CBS is still interested but we need to -"

"Sorry, dude, I just -" He glanced at Stan, "Something came up. Can we meet tomorrow? Later in the week? I'll make it up to you,"

"Yeah," The voice crackled through, still booming, "Does that something have *something* to do with that tight little piece in those photos?" A laugh punched out, and Richie's jaw ticked in what might've been a snarl.

"What photos?" He said instead.

"Richie, dude, you know better," He sighed, "Look, he's cute. And he wasn't blowing you so it's not *bad*, bet that would've been nice though -"

"- Chase -" Richie cut in, but was stamped over.

"I'm *kidding*!" He guffawed, "Relax, shit. But look, paps are out. Full speed ahead. Come on home, lay low. I'm already over. Made myself at home, of course," Stan tensed in his seat, "Just gotta go over some contracts, I promise, super quick."

"You can't just email them?" Richie insisted, "We're in a modern age, man,"

"I mean," Chase's voice *felt* greasy, "If you're gonna be doing *something* important,"

Richie looked to Stan with an apologetic expression before his voice mirrored Chase's tone, "You know me too well, my man. Look, lemme do what I need to do. Come by next week. I'll have all my..." He winced, "Pieces sorted out and we can talk shop. Sound good, dude?"

"God, you animal," Chase laughed, "Wear him out, huh? He seems fun. Have a good time, kiddo. I'll be outta here in twenty, lemme finish my coffee. Y'know, that espresso machine I got you that has a sheen of dust?"

"I know the one," Richie said, shoulders relaxing.

"I'll email the forms in a bit,"

"Yeah, great," Richie laughed, "Bye," He ended the call before Chase could respond. Stan looked at his knees, "I'm sorry about that,"

"It's okay," Stan snickered, "He seems delightful,"

Richie laughed, rubbing his temples as he sighed, "Well I promise you'll never have to meet him."

Stan ended up calling Beverly about Piper. His keys were still in the projection room and hopping around town left him feeling jumpy. He'd rather Bev know where he lived than risk getting spotted while the 'paps were out.' A quick call and nearly hour drive later and they were at a nondescript house.

It was tudor style, older Los Angeles design with nothing that really

made it stand out from the rest of the block. The houses weren't even spaced apart like he'd pictured rich people would have. Two stories with a small driveway and neatly trimmed yard. There were children playing two houses over, no worry of running into traffic with the little culdesac they winded around.

"No one's gonna bother you," Richie promised, hopping up the steps to unlock the door, "Everyone here is loaded, I'm honestly in the lower bracket. Bunch of hedge fund managers or whatever it is rich suit wearers do," Four locks later, and the door swung open, "Everyone just sits in their houses and lets nannies watch their kids,"

"American dream," Stan mumbled, looking around from the brick porch. The kids were small, the younger barely past a toddler. They looked delighted. Stan couldn't hold in a smile.

"C'mon," Richie said, "You might get attention if you keep standing there staring at children,"

Stan followed him inside, and Richie stepped away from the door to let Stan shut it himself. Stan wondered if Richie was doing all this consciously, all these allowances for Stan to make his own decisions. Stan shut the door, did up the locks, and trailed behind Richie as he walked deeper into the house.

Richie flipped the lights on as they went, but it seemed more like a reflex with how little difference it made. The soft dusty glow throughout the home cast an almost orange hue across Richie's freckled skin.

The hallway led to a kitchen with state of the art appliances that looked unused beyond the microwave. A nook held two chairs and an antique table. The living room was decorated like someone else had done it. None of the home looked like Richie.

The only thing that even implied he lived there at all was the row of consoles under the TV and his bedroom which he called, "A shithole," But didn't lead Stan upstairs to see for himself. Stan couldn't tell if it was a privacy thing or an "I'm not expecting sex" thing. Stan hadn't ever done this before, didn't know the dance.

Richie, after a quick tour, dropped onto the couch. He pulled off the glasses that Stan had never seen him without and shoved them into his jacket pocket. He blinked once, twice, and rubbed his lids harshly before settling.

“Why do you wear those?” Stan asked, able now that all the cards were on the table, “Sentinels don’t need glasses,”

Richie shrugged, “They help. Things get too,” he waved his hand, “*Loud*, I guess? Too sharp. So the glasses sorta fuzz things out. Dull the edges. Keep it tolerable.”

“That’s smart,” Stan hummed.

“It’s weird,” Richie amended, “I know. All my shit is turned up to a fuckin’ fifteen. Half the time I can’t get out of bed without wanting to scream but you can’t scream cause *that’s* too loud,”

“It sounds painful,” Stan mumbled, a familiar tug beginning in his chest.

“It’s fucked is what it is,” Richie laughed, but it didn’t reach his eyes, “Broken ass brain. Load of shit. We’re no better than babies,” Richie sneered, “Helpless,”

Stan had thought the same thing countless times. A vulnerable niche group building propaganda like a fortress to benefit themselves. But it felt wrong to agree. Richie didn’t seem to be speaking about Sentinels so much as himself. Stan didn’t think Richie was helpless, he wouldn’t have made it as far as he had if he was helpless. Stan had seen a weak Sentinel before. Richie was nothing like that.

But the words wouldn’t come to him. He wasn’t one for speeches. For declarations. So Stan sat next to him instead. Letting himself settle against the edges and grooves of Richie, sides flush as he let his head rest on the other boy’s shoulder.

“I don’t think you’re helpless,” Stan said, “Just a dumbass,”

Richie laughed, gently shaking them both as his chest fluttered, “Yeah? What gave that away?”

“You should’ve left me there.”

Richie stopped laughing.

“What?”

“At the hospital,”

“No, no, I got that context. I mean,” He twisted, finding Stan’s eyes, “What the *fuck*? Are you serious?”

“I was going to make you forget anyway. To make it easier,” *For me* , “But you... They’ll arrest you. It’s not -”

“- What, it’s not what?”

“*I’m* not worth that,” Stan trembled, but didn’t look away, “You don’t know me,”

“I know you well enough to know you’re a person,” Richie pressed, “A human person who doesn’t - I don’t even know what they do to guides,”

“I could hurt you,” Stan spit, “I could kill you. That other guide almost did - to Ben. That’s why he’s in the hospital,”

“Are you going to?” Richie asked.

Stan faltered, “What?”

“Are you going to kill me?” Richie repeated.

“No,” Stan didn’t - he -

“Yeah, psycho, I know that,” Richie flicked Stan’s forehead. The hand went around to cradle Stan’s head, bringing their foreheads together again, “And I know you know that. Why would I ever be afraid of you?”

The same reason Stan didn’t think he could be afraid of Richie. That the thought alone of that vulnerability was almost worse. Defenses falling without notice. Walls forming around them instead of

between. It was terrifying.

Stan leaned into him, "Because I could kick your ass," He huffed.

"Again," Richie snickered, "We already knew that. You're gonna have to provide new facts, Uris,"

Stan sighed in feigned annoyance. Richie scratched his nails through Stan's curls.

The smile was out of focus; Stan had to go cross eyed to see it. But it was worth it as the hand began to move again. Stan could feel his fingers still trembling, a chilled adrenaline not quite leaving his system. Richie's free hand found his, calloused thumb stroking alone rattling bone.

"We should watch a movie," Richie whispered, like someone could hear, "Because that's something we've never done before,"

"I haven't, actually," Stan mumbled, "I just watch you,"

Maybe it was the proximity that was affecting how much of Stan's foot he could fit in his mouth. A stuttered denial tried to form, but Richie laughed over it.

"Psycho," He teased, like he was saying something else entirely.

"Are you this touchy with all your movie going experience providers?" Stan asked. The hand paused.

"Sorry," Richie whispered, "I just... god saying I like touching you sounds like a serial killer,"

Stan leaned into the hand, "A true maniac, yeah."

Stan watched him hop up to pick a movie from an expansive four options on his shelf, "We have Netflix," Richie said, "But I only keep solid copies of the greats," Stan could see *Holes* and *High School Musical* poking between his fingers.

Stan nodded solemnly, but the raspberry crept between his pursed lips until Richie muttered, "Sacrilege," And made a decision. An

empty desert full of teenage boys filled the menu screen. Richie, after half tripping into the kitchen, returned with chips and sodas next to Stan.

Stan didn't know what he expected Richie to be like during a movie for all his nervous energy and talkative nature. But Richie seemed almost hyper focused, only dropping little bits of trivia about how the yellow spotted lizards were bearded dragons and locations they shot at.

By the time Stanley Yelnats - Stan had asked twice if Richie picked the movie on the name alone - was on a bus, Stan had finished his soda. The sugar calmed the jitter in him, let him settle into the overstuffed couch and Richie's flank. He leaned forward, dislodging Richie only to put the can onto the table, then slumped back into the warmth along his side. Stan's arm went lax between them, hand palm up and open, fingers brushing Richie's own.

He hadn't meant to, hadn't calculated like kids in movies always tried. But the contact sent a set of shivers through Stan again. There was no danger, no immediate threat or camera to break contact for. Stan could just... slide his hand an inch over, if that. Just a bit. He counted the seconds in his head, getting to sixty before allowing himself to try again.

Once their fingers rested between each other's, cradled in the gaps between their knuckles, Stan felt a bit at a loss. What now? He knew what he *could* do but, all of this was new territory. No man's land had opened up around him in opportunity. He felt like a kid, like a dork who was trying to - to make a move. Except he wasn't fourteen on a first date with his parent's money. He was twenty five.

Stan's hand twitched, ready to settle back into his own lap and actually watch the movie, when Richie's grip closed around his own. Threading their fingers together, a steady pressure around his hand that was familiar in sensation yet new in intention. Stan squeezed back, and let his jaw rest on Richie's shoulder as the other boy's cheek hit his head.

"I had a crush on Zero," Stan admitted, smiling at their first reading lesson.

"Everyone did," Richie agreed, "That was practically a law. He was the cutest," His face scruffed across Stan's hair, "Maybe it was the curls, gotta love a boy with curls -"

"Stop talking during the movie," Stan snipped, face flushing.

"You started it," Richie insisted. Stan squeezed his hand harder, until Richie wheezed a, "Brat," and dropped a kiss to his scalp.

He probably didn't mean anything by it. It had been a long day, a terrifying day, and the warmth of safety must've seeped into them both. But Stan felt like a brand had been placed. A ring where Richie's lips had pressed that left him squeezing Richie's hand once more.

Human contact had been off the table since Stan learned it could end his life. And being admittedly touch starved was better than any alternative. He wouldn't risk even hugging his mother anymore, paranoid of something setting anything off - a constant barrage of possibilities Stan couldn't ever hope to counter measure.

He'd felt safe with his mom before. She had been everything to him. But since the quarry Stan couldn't be sure. She'd seen the unlabeled shuttles go flying by, ones that would lock Stan's spike, and just assured him they were, "Doing their jobs, sweet pea. It's okay. They aren't going to bother you."

Stan had wanted to tell her. Had wanted to tell her everything just like Ms. Collins had told him not to. But he couldn't be *sure* that she'd still love him. That she'd kiss his cheek and hold him and shush until he calmed down enough to tell her what was wrong. That she'd hold his hand while he told his dad and they'd both say they loved him and it would be okay.

He didn't want to chance that heartbreak.

Richie hadn't changed, granted Stan hadn't intended to tell him. Richie had held him and told him it was going to be okay.

"You make me feel safe," Stan confessed, voice shushed as the movie played on.

“Good,” Richie said, “You deserve to,” They watched Sam offer to fix anything and everything, “I had a crush on Sam too,”

“Everyone did,” Stan said.

“Could I kiss you?” Stan asked, half worried half hoping Richie couldn’t hear.

Richie smiled, “You picked the worst time,” He nodded to the screen, “Tragedy is about to hit,”

“Yeah,” Stan agreed, not looking away, “But they’re happy now,”

Richie leaned closer, until their breath mingled. Until Stan swore Richie could feel the nervous heat from his face, “They’re happy now,”

Stan closed the gap.

Richie tasted like Dr Pepper and salt. The kiss was slow, almost chaste. Their mouths moved hesitantly, dry lips brushing until Stan felt the peak of a tongue.

A shot rang out. Stan jerked away, alarmed, to see the lone boat on the screen. Richie chuckled and Stan hid in his neck with a groan.

“I warned you,” Richie teased, “Worst time.”

Stan hummed I’m agreement, but murmured, “Worth it,” against mole splatted skin.

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm so sorry for the extensive amount of holes movie references.

please lemme know what you think. i'll respond to all comments if it kills me.

10. lehtësi

Stan woke up before the sun rose. Headlights swung across the windows, bleeding light into the room enough that Stan's eyes creaked open. Glaring white washing across tufted pillows and Richie's elbow cradling Stan's head. They vanished a moment later, as the car followed the bend of the cul de sac.

He was still on the couch with his back flush to Richie's chest. A throw blanket haphazardly skewed across their legs. The other boy's nose was jammed into his neck, the skin hot as Richie breathed deeply against him. Stan felt a tacky sweat along his back, overheated with Richie slotted up against him all night in jackets and jeans. He thought to dislodge, pull the fabric from where it clung to him, let his skin breathe a moment. But Richie shifted, arm a solid weight across Stan's hip, and Stan settled back down once more.

He woke again to Richie moving, restless from being pinned between the couch and Stan sleeping. Stan twisted to look up at him, and found Richie looking sheepish at being caught staring.

"I've only been awake for like, two minutes," Richie promised, "I was just trying to figure out how to slip out and make you breakfast,"

"Do you even know how to cook?" Stan asked, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

"In theory," Richie shrugged, "I just assumed you'd tell me I'm awesome at it since you adore me so much,"

"You assumed wrong," Stan said, "I actually can't stand you."

"Damn, all my suspicions confirmed,"

"I'm just in it for the playstation," Stan said solemnly, "What do you want?"

Richie squinted at that, "What?"

"For breakfast," Stan clarified, "I don't want to die when you burn the house down,"

“Aww, babe, are you cooking for me cause you made a move last night?” Richie laughed at Stan’s pinkening ears, tugging them both up and almost successfully not tripping. They both sprawled across the floor, “Gonna make me eggos for putting out?”

“Please tell me you have more than eggos,” Stan huffed, pointedly ignoring the suggestion of putting out.

Richie just laughed again, which was concerning, and got his feet under himself in a crouch. Two arms slid beneath Stan’s back and knees and was lifted into the air. A most decidedly *not* shriek left Stan at the movement. His arms swung to cling to Richie’s neck, one hand accidentally smacking the other’s cheek.

The walk to the kitchen didn’t end in disaster like Stan had feared. Richie did an *alarming* maneuver of twisting Stan so he instead rode on his back. Richie’s skin was practically thrumming beneath Stan’s arms, movements quick and alert. Every shift of Stan against him seemed to send a jolt through him, like he was trying to -

Oh.

Stan had read about bonding once, tucked away in a corner of his middle school library with a book on *Growing Up Sentinel Strong!* It had been glossed over, almost clinical in explanation. Seeing Richie now... that made sense.

Compatible people would start to tune into each other. Stan was, whether or not he actively tried, balancing Richie’s senses. And Richie, by fluctuation of his own sensory input, would become dependent on Stan for a period of time as he adjusted. Stan would learn to subconsciously ease Richie to a functional state as Richie learned how to be eased to a tolerable level.

Richie was cataloguing his touch, his sensitivity jacked up to receive and feel every sensation with vivid clarity. He wasn’t doing it intentionally, and even began to look a little pained by Stan’s elbow shifting against his collarbone. Wincing like the shift of their skin was *loud*.

Stan placed a palm to Richie’s forehead, pressing gently against the

prickling skin. His own forehead pressing against the crown of Richie's head. Richie stopped moving completely, paused for the first time since he'd woken. Stan let his hand and head press firmer, a solid weight for Richie to focus into. It might've looked ridiculous if Stan thought too hard about it. Richie standing in a kitchen with Stan on his back covering his eyes.

But Stan let himself focus, let his own mind settle into a calm blank. Richie's grip on his thighs lessened, slack but steady. Stan didn't know *what* he was doing any more than he'd known any of the times before. Not trying to push a motive, but just ease Richie into something more comfortable.

They didn't stay like that for more than a minute, if that. But Richie took a deep breath, like he'd broken to the surface for the first time in years, and tipped his head back against Stan's own.

"Witchcraft," He hummed, voice slow but not drunk.

"Yeah," Stan mumbled, "Probably,"

Breakfast ended up being eggos, if only because Richie had the taste buds of a nine year old. Stan made eggs too. Still perched on Richie's back, directing him quietly on when to turn the burner up and when to flip. Again, it would've been ridiculous. But Stan just let himself enjoy the boost in height.

He was put down to eat, but the two kept knocking knees beneath the small breakfast table.

Bonding was normal, Stan knew, but it left him with a flush of embarrassment. He hadn't been prepared for how eager he would be for the contact. Every nudge or squeeze or grip felt like a relief. Like he'd been starving himself for so long and now there was an outpour of just... affection. Honest affection.

The kiss had snowballed into not being more than two feet apart at any given moment. None of it felt feverish, rushed, even intense. It just felt *nice*. That wasn't ever in the book Stan had read. It probably wasn't heard of anymore. Stan couldn't imagine mimicking the delight he felt when Richie leaned into his hand or hugged him

closer.

Stan almost went to kiss him again, but didn't want to push it; wouldn't chance knocking the greatest feeling he'd had off its axis.

Like curling up on the couch with mindless sitcoms playing for background noise. Richie was sprawled on his back, Stan molded up against him; chest to chest. A hand scratching through his unmanageable hair, impersonating any lines that made Stan laugh so he could, "Hear that again," Richie blew on the springier curls to watch them bounce, "Your hair is ridiculous,"

"Yeah, it's not great," Stan agreed.

"No, it's amazing," Richie said, "Wild, wild hair. How does it know to grow like that?"

"Does it all by itself," Stan promised, taking a grave tone that made Richie snicker. Stan liked when Richie laughed, when he could without strain, "It's like you're high,"

"Nah," Richie said, "I'm not cool enough for weed,"

"That is nearly unbelievable,"

"What? That I'm not cool?"

"No; that you don't have weed. I know you're not cool," Stan clarified, curls flying as Richie puffed at them in retaliation.

"I don't know how it'd mix," Richie began to stroke Stan's brows as he spoke, "Some people get mellow, but some people get paranoid. Didn't wanna chance it,"

"Makes sense," Stan hummed, scrunching his brows just to be difficult.

"Why? You ever been high?" Richie asked, nails dragging through the fine hairs.

Stan snorted, "No, god, never,"

"Lil' straight edge," Richie teased, "Bet you've never even been drunk,"

"Once," Stan corrected, "With Beverly... on a roof, and then a bar. But mainly a roof,"

"What a way to begin," Richie laughed, "You got a whole mess of firsts, I bet."

Stan's face heated despite himself and he bit Richie's palm. Richie squawked, and flailed it dramatically. Stan slipped his fingers beneath the collar of Richie's tee, knuckles brushing his collarbone.

"You weren't my first kiss, if that's what you're trying to imply," Stan drawled.

"I'd never, you're a big boy -"

" - You were my second."

Richie seemed to shut down, "Second person?"

"Second kiss," Stan admitted.

"Ever?" Richie giggled, looking nothing short of delighted as his arms found their way around the small of Stan's back. He tugged him up closer as he asked, "Who was first? Who do I gotta fight?"

Stan groaned, "Patty Blum,"

They'd been eighteen. Freshman year at a college party with Stan hugging a wall to avoid the slosh of alcohol. He'd been adamantly trying for normality in a sea of people who didn't recognize him.

She'd been so pretty, chocolate curls framing her face like a mermaid. Patty had drank enough for the both of them, and had laughed at anything Stan had said. She'd leaned against him as he'd offered to walk her home since that seemed like the thing he should do. He'd gone for the kiss, just as he'd done with Richie. He felt a little bad about it, she'd been past tipsy when he nervously stepped closer.

But she'd said she'd marry him on her porch steps. And Stan... had

let himself believe it, just for a second. That they could do that. That he could propose to her and she'd say yes and they'd have a kid and a bird and a dog too. So he'd leaned in and kissed her.

It had been obvious he didn't know how if the look on her face was any indication. She'd smiled at him, been sweet about it, but Stan let her go inside without a word. He saw her two more times before he'd dropped out. She'd been much quieter, but just as kind. She clearly was waiting for him to ask her out, be the sweet man she thought he was.

He never let himself. Seeing her outside of the flashing lights and thrumming music was as sobering as anything. He wouldn't chance making her unhappy.

Stan told Richie as much, quietly reliving it against Richie's slowly rising and falling chest. Richie squeezed him tighter, "She sounds lovely,"

"She was," Stan looked at Richie, "You are too,"

"Aw, Stanley," Richie leaned in, "Could I kiss you?"

"Don't mock me," Stan grumbled, but tilted his chin up regardless.

"Never," Richie promised and kissed him slowly, "Maybe a little," He conceded. Stan bit his lower lip, sucking it between his teeth as Richie's breath hitched, "You're gonna make me *blush*,"

"Are you *sure* you're not high?" Stan laughed, cheeks pinking at his own actions.

"Just on you. I'm not cool, remember?" Richie drummed a pattern across Stan's ribs, an actual rhythm forming, no longer mindless and scattered, "Booze though," Richie gleamed, "I got plenty of that. We could get good and toasted if you want,"

Stan's laugh trailed off at that, "Really?"

"Anything for you, babe," Richie cooed.

"It's..." Stan looked to Richie's phone, tossed onto the coffee table,

“Eight in the morning,”

“I’m sure you’d be a much better kisser drunk,” Stan dropped his head, smug at the *oof* from his chin digging into Richie, “I’m *kidding*, Jesus - “

“If you insist.”

“Control your enthusiasm, please,” Richie said, making no move to dislodge Stan from his chest. Stan laid his hands flat on the Richie’s nape, fingers threaded along his spine, brushing against baby hairs, “Un... unmanageable,” Richie melted into the touch, and let his hands trace up Stan’s back to mirror the grip. Stan didn’t speak, didn’t push a thought just as he’d done at breakfast. There was no need to urge Richie to *relax* or *forget* or *stop*.

They laid there for a moment longer, soft puffs of breath against Stan’s forehead and Richie’s chest. Socked toes curling against Richie’s calf, creases forming against his cheek from the seams of Richie’s shirt.

There was just the two of them, comfortable and silent and settled.

Stan had travelled across state lines, running from phantoms and eyes that didn’t blink. From a cursed sentencing that had been in his identity before he could ever prepare to face it.

It wasn’t scary with Richie. It felt right. Like this was something that could be okay. The hauntings of childhood brushed away with Richie’s hands against him. Stan had him, really had him in his grip. And Richie didn’t try to dominate it, control it. Just as Stan didn’t try to control him. Just, let them rest. Let himself be a presence in Richie’s mind that was able to settle his bones.

It was complete placidity.

Richie’s phone clattered across the table, lighting up as it vibrated. Stan startled at the noise, but Richie didn’t even blink, mumbling a soft, “Ignore it,” As it continued to shake.

It finally went to voicemail before immediately ringing again. And again. The noise was grating in the room that felt filled from their

trance of silence. Even Netflix had asked if they were still watching in consideration.

But it rang again.

Richie finally groaned, arm dragging from Stan's neck to flip the phone into his hand. A glaring white light came off it before Stan's eyes focused.

Chase Hanson

Stan blinked, "Wha...?"

The door slammed open behind them, wood ricocheting into the plaster wall.

Stan froze, uncomprehending as the room filled with blinding flood lights. Richie froze beneath him, the light locking him up beneath Stan's hand. His grip tightened on Stan, fingers unyielding in reflexive shock. Stan grappled them, trying to pry himself free, feet scrambling under him as, oh god - oh *fuck* - soldiers rushed the room.

They were everywhere, a wall forming around the two of them as Richie tried to focus and Stan tried to flee. There was nowhere to go, there was nowhere to fucking go but he had to -

MOVE

The pillars around him didn't waver. The plea - the *command* - that rattled through fell to deaf ears. They were Leveled. He couldn't touch them. Richie's hand flew off him, afflicted by the push, and Stan threw himself at the closest body. They staggered as he hurled himself, his entire weight just enough to tip them. A stun baton rammed its way between his ribs. Stan shouted at the pain, blinding and startling, but didn't let himself stop moving. His feet sliding as they meet wood. The soldiers regrouped after him. The door was wide open.

It was right there itwasrightthereitwas *rightthere* -

A callous hand dug into his hair, whipping him back into the floor. Stan's skull hit the wood with a sickening *smack*, the wind knocked

from his lungs as swamp eyes stared down at him.

Gretta smiled cruelly, "Shoulda fucking known," Her nails dug crescents of blood into his curls.

Stan's hands grabbed her wrist, yanking as she twisted her grip viciously. A yell clawed out of him as strands of hair pulled free. A knee slammed into his chest, holding him flat. His vision was graying, spots dancing across the room as he tried to scramble. He was a trapped animal.

Boots thudded next to his ear, and a horrible gleam of metal links clicked together above him.

No

"Officer Gretta Keene. Rogue Collection Division, proceeding containment of Stanley Uris, age twenty five."

Nononono

"You have been hiding your biological status as a guide."

The grip ripped further into Stan's skin, her free hand palm striking his jaw. Forcing his head to tilt up. Holding his throat exposed as the links *clicked clicked clicked*

Nonono get off geTOFF N O NO N O

"Rogues are an enemy of the state and will not be -"

Stan's hand shot out, fingers digging savagely into her face to try and dislodge her. Blood seeped beneath his nails. Her smile became a snarl of rage as she slammed his head back against floor once, twice - but his arms were longer. She couldn't get out of his reach. A baton crackled in the bend of his elbow. But he dug harder, unable to get a grip but clawing at her, desperate to get away. A blind need to *fightfightfight* building in him.

GET OFF GET OFF NONONONO

" - Tolerated." She spit as she held him prone. More hands gripped

him, yanked him, held him down. But his nails clung to her scratched face, digging gouges - He wouldn't stop -

The collar clicked into place.

Stan screamed. A ragged cry of agony.

d i e

Gretta's eyes widened, brow twitching in confused horror for a moment before her whole neck jerked.

A deafening crack echoed.

Her swamp eyes pooled bloodshot, face frozen as her head dangled horribly to the right. Stan saw the vertebrae shifted out of line.

His scream didn't stop. Cracking into wracking sobs.

The hands left him. Flying off of his person as Gretta collapsed against his shaking form. Only the cold metal vice around his throat held him now.

A hand brush through his blood matted curls, gently, softly. Lovingly. A wash of calm settled over him. Relaxing his muscles and bones and nerves as Gretta was tugged from atop him and into a heap on the floor.

"That's quite enough of that,"

Stan's head flopped to the side, unable to balance itself upright. Blurred patent loafers came into view, floating through Stan's hazy vision. He felt warm. Artificially warm. A syrupy weight was in his bloodstream. Leaving him prone, exposed. The panic hadn't left him, but he lay as still as sleep just the same.

that ' s it , stanley . settle down .

It reverberated through him, through every inch of him. And he complied. Unwilling and aware, his body sank regardless. A horror shot through him.

He was being eased.

The guide before him, too blurry to see expression, cooed like a doting parent. Cradling Stan's freshly bruised jaw, "That's alright, huh? You're just fine. Just *relax*,"

Stan went impossibly more weightless. Sinking into the polished grain beneath him. The hand stayed on him, stroking his forehead as he was hoisted into the air. His limbs were unresponsive, twisted and jerked like a rag doll in the grip of a stranger. It was a cruel mirror to how Richie had lifted him not hours before.

Richie.

Where was Richie?

"Shhh," The voice came again, and the hand tilted his swaying head to droop behind him, neck bending as he looked upside down across the living room.

Richie was standing, expression blank. He stared at Stan.

Stan felt tears drip down his temples despite not a single muscle twitching in his face.

Richie please

that's enough, stanley.

Stan was jerked back into himself, Richie didn't so much as twitch. Face passive as he watched.

"Don't worry," The guide crooned, "He's okay, see? He doesn't need you,"

Stan began to move. Out the door. Down the steps. Until all he could see were closing van doors.

The guide came back into view. Cradling Stan's head in their... his lap. It was a man. A tall man. His eyes were shockingly blue. Stan couldn't look away from them, unable to even move his eyes in their sockets.

Stan tried to beg, to sob, to scream. But he couldn't even blink.

A hand covered his eyes, pushing his lids down. Encasing him in darkness.

now sleep .

Stan sank.

Notes for the Chapter:

aaaaaaaaand we're in it now.

thank you for sticking it out this far. it means the world i swear. can you believe that THIS point was the original idea? and all that came before was so i seemed like less of a sadist?

the story is only going to get darker. please note that my dudes. this is angst. i beg you to stick it out.

lemme know if it sucked.

11. lengvumas

Stan slept on his side, usually curled around a pillow - or more recently Richie. He always kept himself facing a door. Wrapped up in blankets upon blankets and tucked as small as possible. It was comforting that way. Shelter. Even if it was just the illusion of it. Which is why laying splayed across his back with nothing over him pulled Stan from sleep faster than his groggy mind could process.

A gray ceiling met his sleep muddled gaze. Smooth plaster with an imbedded light running along the seam of the crown molding. It was refracted through a cloudy plastic cover, making everything seem soft and hazy. Indirect.

His mouth was drier than it had ever been, tongue caked to the roof of his mouth, lips cracked. His stomach clenched, empty. His clothes felt tacky, clinging to clammy skin. He arched his back, soft pops darting down his spine, and went to tug the shirt off.

His hands didn't move. Stan looked up, craning his neck at the angle to see soft fleece lined leather cuffed around his wrists. They lay sewn to a strap that ran just above his head. Stan was *incredibly* awake now. A whole body jerk ran through him, reflexive and terrified, to have a sharp ache run through his ankles. They were in the same casing, pulling his legs laid taut to the jersey sheets beneath him. He jerked again as the day before - week before? How long had he *been* here - flooded back.

The lights. Gretta. Blood filled swamp eyes. Then blue ones. Horribly blue pulling him down until he couldn't see.

Splayed like a pinned butterfly. Stan abruptly stopped, air constricted in his chest; unwilling to move. A choking panic started to fill him, cloying up his throat till he felt sick with it. A ragged gasp punched out of him. He was - he was *here* - he was going to *die* here or *worse* -

A reedy breath fought through his teeth, unable to stay in his lungs before it shot back out in panicked puffs. His vision felt spotty, oxygen not reaching him, and his vision became blurry with tears flooding his eyes, cutting down his temples and onto the pillowcase

beneath him.

“You can’t cry here, kiddo,” A voice drawled, “People’ll know how pretty you look,”

The air in Stan froze again. Startled into a sense of placidity at the airy voice to his right. He turned his head, and just over the crux of his elbow, he could see a man.

Practically a boy. He was an odd blend of childish features and deep age - but couldn’t have been more than a few years Stan’s senior. He had long black hair, looped waves brushing his shoulders and framing a placid face. His lips were a deep red, almost liver like, and they sat expressionless in his face. His eyes were blue. Not the blue from before, but nearly gray. They almost protruded from his sockets, staring at Stan.

But he sat on the opposite bed. Clad in a polo and fitted khakis with soft nearly soleless shoes. Not in cuffs, but in the room all the same. No collar sat around his neck, but the red tinged ring along his long throat looked like healed burns.

“Help,” Stan rasped, not daring to be any louder than a whisper, “Help me,”

The man looked almost *bored*. Observing Stan, not moving at all. Stan flexed in the binds, asking again, a plea seeping into his tone. The man did nothing. No hesitation on his face, no fear of repercussions. He just didn’t *want* to.

An anger bubbled in Stan, and he wrenched his wrists and ankles towards his center, hoping for any give to throttle this fucker across from him.

“What is wrong with you?” Stan spit, “Help me you fucking piece of - *shit*,”

Stan choked on his words as the other stood up suddenly, movements liquid as he rose to an alarming full height. His eyes weren’t any more alive, but an interest in his posture set Stan’s teeth on edge.

“What did you say?” He asked.

"I said help me," Stan demanded, patience giving to desperation. Someone could come in at any moment. He needed to get off this bed.

A livery smile stretched across his face. He loomed over Stan, face blocked from the soft glow of light.

"You're funny," He said.

A heavy weight dropped onto Stan's stomach, knocking the air out of him as the man made himself comfortable. He was *sitting* on him. Cold hands began to touch him, pulling at the skin of his arms, his neck, his face, until Stan winced as his tender scalp was tugged. The man paused, eyes flat, as he began to prod further. Stan's eyes prickled at the sting, torn skin pressed at by bitten down fingernails.

"Stop," Stan wheezed, struggling to breath under the weight. The man ignored him, and Stan attempted to jerk his head away as a scab was peeled away. The hands shot out violently, holding him still. Stan met his eyes, unable to look away. The man leaned closer, closer, until Stan's vision swam with him.

Stan didn't speak, and the man looked to grow bored again. The hands slid back up into his hair. Stan blurted, "What's your name?"

The eyes shot back to him. A smile growing once more.

"You can't ask that," He dismissed.

"What?"

He laughed a little, eyes nearly crinkling to match his smile, "Against the rules."

"What rules?" Stan asked, "I don't - I don't know them, just help me - *god!*"

A brutal tug came again. And then a slow press into the mattress, pressure growing against his freshly stinging scalps until Stan jerked back against the grip - consequences damned. The man looked even more amused at that.

The grip on his face relented, and Stan let himself be grateful for a moment as the buckle of his left wrist began to give. Icy fingers slid across the veins, dragging against thin skin.

“Still fresh,” He hummed, “They never leave it fresh. Rather cook it fast,”

“I don’t know what that means,” Every attempt to free himself just made the grip tighter. A more restricting vice than the leather had been. More dangerous.

“You weren’t cooked...” He said, nail digging into the skin until it turned pink, “That means you weren’t awake. Only process the live ones,” His eyes met Stan’s own again.

“I...”

“How many did you kill?”

Stan’s blood ran as cold as the grip. Swamp eyes filled the dull blue staring at him. Alarming angles of bone. Blood soaked corneas.

Cliff edges.

“None - what? I’ve, I’ve never -” His bones creaked under the grip.

“No lying,” The man sang, “No lying in here. Apologize.” Stan gasped at his wrist twisted slowly in the *wrong wrong wrong* direction, “Hurt my feelings,”

“I’m sorry,” Stan wheezed, the twist didn’t let up, “I’m *sorry* - I - I - *fuck*,”

stop

The other’s eyes lit up, and Stan didn’t know if he’d ever seen anything scarier.

“Ohhhh,” He didn’t shake off the order, didn’t even flinch, and - it wasn’t even a word, a real order, stabbed through Stan. All his joints shook, locked, froze. A yell punched out of him at the pain, “That’s interesting,”

Stan couldn't even get words out to fight it, didn't dare throw another command.

The man's grip left him, Stan's hand frozen crooked in the air. It was like the man, but instead of being relaxed into paralysis, it was with violence. Like an animal's shriek through his nerves. Unresponsive. Prone. Helpless. A hand threaded through his curls, no longer digging, but almost adoringly, "You're so fun," He whispered, like a childish secret, "Let's have some more,"

The grip surged in his hair, and the other man jerked on top of him before slowly looking up and away. Stan couldn't follow the gaze, couldn't move from where he was, but a light filled the bottom of his peripherals.

"That's enough, 16120," A soft voice rang through the room.

The man, 16120, didn't argue. A bored expression settling back on his face. He simply moved away, dropping back onto his own bed once more. Soft steps echoed until they stopped next to Stan, a young woman holding a tray looking down at him.

She touched Stan's hand gently, still stuck at the angle 16120 had forced it into, and sighed. Her brow furrowed, and she looked almost apologetically at Stan before quipping a quick, "Sorry,"

A horrible jolt shot through Stan, ricocheting off his nerves and all consuming. It lasted for barely a moment, but he seized and nearly began to sob. He hand dropped to his chest, shaking.

"We only do that if you're bad," The girl said, beginning to undo the other wrist strap, "I swear. I just didn't wanna leave you like that," She smiled at him, "I'm Rory,"

Stan's throat clicked, still shivering from the horrible electricity that ghosted along his skin. Rory released his wrist, and laid it to rest on his chest against the other. She moved down to unbuckle his feet quickly, and held out both hands to pull him upright.

She was smaller than Stan, but not by much. Her hair was wild, rich tight curls framing her face and messily pulled into a bun. Her

clothes were too fitted and expensive looking to be scrubs, but still looked distinctly sterile. Her ensemble a palette that matched the walls with a soft heavy cardigan bunched to her elbows.

Her left wrist held a thick band, a wide touch screen covering the expanse that held two blinking dots. They had titles beneath them.

16120

51186

Stan didn't want to think of who that was supposed to be.

A cup of water was placed in his shaking hands and he stared at it for a long moment before glancing up at Rory beneath his curls.

"It's not poisoned," She laughed, "Last thing we want is you getting sick. Just water. Scout's honor," Stan drank quickly, coughing on the last few swallows. It sat heavy in his gut, his stomach clenching at it sudden capacity. Rory extended her hand once more to pull him up.

He took her hand, "I'm St-"

"Come on," She cut through. 16120 laughed on the other side of the room.

Rory didn't cuff him, but walked behind him, a soft touch between shoulder blades to guide him as he walked. Her other hand rested on her elbow, ready to reach for her watch if necessary. Stan didn't want to feel that again so soon.

The halls were the same color as the room he'd been locked in, soft gray across the walls and ceiling with smooth marble beneath his feet. A single door was open to his right, a sobbing child sitting on a bed as a crouched man held their wrists. Stan turned his head to keep looking, concerned, but the hand against his back pressed harder.

Stan had visualized The Center before in cold sweats and debilitating panics. He could never decide between a hospital or prison. Cages? Maybe. Medical scrubs carrying lobotomy spikes? Sure.

But the halls around him didn't feel quite like either. They were

bland. And completely empty. The child had been the only open door they'd passed. None of them had windows. Or handles. Only the seam of a doorway with small printed letters broke the endless gray wash ahead of him. It looked like a sterilized version of the lobby Stan had seen when he'd stood with Ben.

Their footsteps felt deafening, but even worse they felt voluntary. There were no guards. No stun batons or kevlar vests. The orderly wasn't even gripping him, pushing him, just guiding on when to turn. Just Stanley and Rory and two rings of metal. Except Stan's was around his throat and didn't have a latch. Stan didn't want to let that make himself feel better, but a warped assurance settled in him regardless.

They finally stopped at a door. *GUIDE PROCESSING* printed in neat slate letters across it. The word 'cook' echoed through Stan's thoughts with a vacant tone. Rory pressed her wristband to a box above the handle and the door clicked. She easily swung it open and pressed to Stan's shoulder to angle him through the door. His sneakers squeaked beneath him, jarringly loud in the empty hall.

It was a simple room. Clean, sterile, unassuming. But Stan stopped short at the examination table drilled into the center of the floor. The hand pressed firmly once more, but Stan did not move. A hitched breath shot out of him, and Rory's hand splayed across spine, fingers wide.

"We won't strap you down unless you make us," She said. Stan's throat clicked beneath the metal collar, small gasps for air at the way the chair had so many levers, so many ways to contort, "Do you want us to strap you down?"

What kind of a question was that? What kind of a choice?

She guided him forward. He sat.

Rory didn't tell Stan to lay back, let him practically dangle of the stiff cushioning wrapped in sanitation paper. She went to grab a clipboard stuffed with paperwork, and dropped into a rolley stool with a smile. The top of the page was stamped with 51186 in bright red ink. She clicked the pen twice before asking, "Age?"

They already knew that, Gretta had said it when they took him.

“Twenty five,” He mumbled.

She smiled, “Date of birth?”

“January twelfth,”

“Previous resid...” She paused, squinting at her chart before a little laugh left her, “You’re twenty six,” Stan blinked, “It’s the thirteenth,” She clarified, “You were out for three days. Never thought you’d get up,” She clicked her pen twice more, “Happy birthday!”

Happy Birthday. There was no reaction to that. Static clogged Stan’s ears as his eyes stung. Three days had passed. He’d been cuffed to a bed or god knows what else for three days. Nothing had interfered, interceded, intervened.

Stan had wanted to tell Richie. Confess into fleece sweatshirts that his birthday was soon - just a few days away. But it had been embarrassing. Uncharacteristically self indulgent; hoping for excitement from Richie. So he swallowed down his tongue instead.

Rory began to speak again, tugging Stan’s arm to put a pressure cuff around it. He answered despondently, unaware of even the questions. Complete auto pilot as his lungs, pulse, and blood pressure were checked. A tear slipped out, Stan made no move to wipe it away. His face didn’t shift as he stared blankly ahead.

Only once she went to her wrist did Stan flinch, preemptively tensing for the surge that would come. She looked up at him, and laughed a tinkling thing, “Only if you’re bad,” She reminded, singing like Stan was a child. She held the cuff to her face, “Dr. Geier, to Processing,” Stan watched her back away from her wrist slowly, overdramatic concern on her face. Like it was a joke. Like they were sharing a moment.

The door slid open to show a man, lumbering and wide with a harshly receded hairline. He took the clipboard, and had what could’ve been a kind smile under any other circumstances. He didn’t ever look directly at Stan, but asked Rory questions like the boy

wasn't there at all. When he finally turned to Stan, there was a darker look in his slanted eyes, "Bit of a troublemaker?"

"What?" Stan asked, caught off guard.

"We don't normally have rogues brought home on stretchers," The man noted, reading through the pages, "... Nor do we normally have fatalities."

"He's up for the procedure," Rory chimed in.

Stan tensed at that, the boy in the room's voice echoing *cook cook cook* once more .

"That's not up to me," Dr. Geier dismissed, "We just need to finish booking," He hauled himself off of the stool, corded hairy arms peeking beneath slightly too short coat sleeves, "And then I can go to lunch."

"Did the Mrs. pack anything edible this time?" Rory laughed, pulling a rubber tie around Stan's arm.

"Fiancee, not Mrs. and I can only hope," He walking closer, alarmingly in Stan's space, "Food made with love doesn't always lack salmonella,"

An alarmingly large needle came into view, with only a quick swipe of antiseptic before easing into the crook of his elbow. Stan looked at the ceiling as the blood sluiced, more unable to watch than he was willing to look away from the two others. Stan didn't look back until the tug of the needle left his arm. Five vials of blood were being labeled. The room felt too small for the three of them, and especially too small for Stan with how they crowded him. There was nowhere to look to avoid, to pretend he wasn't there.

Rory reached beneath the table and pulled out a metal bar that *clicked clicked clicked* its sockets until reaching right beside Stan. He didn't recognize it from the few times he'd gone to the doctor as a kid. It locked at an odd angle, reaching just off of the table. The top of the bar held a cupped metal piece with a velcro strap over it.

A stirrup.

Stan jerked despite himself, a million horrible outcomes rushing through his mind as Rory fiddled with the angle. He swung back and away, letting his spine smack into the edge of the table. He could already feel a bruise forming, but followed through - rocking his legs up to his chest, aiming to flip off the table, to run anywhere. No plan formed in his brain except *cook cook cook* -

His left foot smacked into Dr. Geier's chin, and Stan hoped for him to stagger, falter enough to get around his bulking shape, before a huge grip closed violently around his ankle. Stan was tugged back onto the table, shirt riding up as it dragged across plastic coated leather. An arm pressed down against his chest, an unyielding bar as Stan struggled, "Rory, please," The doctor said, before there was a sharp prick in Stan's shoulder. He looked to see Rory passively pushing a plunger down, a low heat coiling through his veins.

"Troublemaker indeed," Dr. Geier huffed, face dotted with sweat at the alarmingly strong maneuver. He held him for a moment longer, until Stan began to sag beneath him. Stan's mouth felt like it had been stuffed with cotton, sluggish and lead filled limbs rolled without response. It wasn't like when he'd been taken, more artificial, less bearing into his soul. But horrible nonetheless, "Just a sedative," The doctor said, "Nothing too intense, I'm just not keen on getting whapped again,"

"Softie," Rory laughed, "Letting them relax instead of just -"

"My lunch is waiting to poison me," Dr. Geier reminded, "If you'd please,"

The table shifted beneath Stan, one end rising up until it resembled a recliner. Stan still tried to jerk away, but his movements were weak, like an angry toddler. He was easily moved to where they wanted, propped into a slouched sitting position. Struggling from just that alone exhausted him, head heavy as it lolled. Dr. Geier pushed against his forehead until Stan's body tipped back against the crinkled paper. Stan watched him drop back onto his stool and roll away to the far wall as Rory adjusted the stirrup again. It was slid beneath the table until it came to rest by Stan's left arm.

He blinked at that, both trying to focus and understand the odd

placement. Rory grabbed his hand, palm up, and put it into place, wrist laid and strapped into the cup. The bar was pulled out until Stan's arm was taut. The band aid from the needle before looked up at him. She went beneath the table once more to pull straps from the edges. One long band went across Stan's chest as another wrapped around his opposite wrist.

"Remind me the number?" Dr. Geier asked, fiddling with something on the other side of the room. Cabinet open beneath him and he hunched on his little stool.

"51186," Rory chirped, and began to wipe down his entire forearm with another antiseptic wipe.

"51186," The doctor reiterated, and a small metal tube was placed on the counter, obscured by the doctor's massive build as he fiddled with it.

The room was quiet as Rory jotted down a few more notes, Stan secured and unable to shift much less run. The sedative wasn't created any comfort, but it was making Stan drowsy. The scritch of pen across paper almost soothing as his eyelids began to drop. Only a soft drag against his soft skin woke him up enough to loll his head to Rory. She was dragged a razor down his arm, methodically wiping stray hairs away.

Stan felt much more awake at that, remembering how Beverly thought it was funny when men had a single patch of hair removed for a tattoo. No - they couldn't - no way -

But Dr. Geier didn't turn around with a needle or tattoo gun.

He turned around with a rod of cast iron.

The rod had a bar and the end, about two inches wide, glowing a cruel orange. A high keen left Stan's throat, bubbling panic constricting his airways as the man rolled back over to his side. Rory did one final brush of the wipe across his skin before Dr. Geier leveled the metal just below Stan's wrist.

"No," Stan pleaded, "Nonono, stop, I - *don't*,"

He threw every plea, every command he could. The two didn't move.

"On three," He offered, like Stan was a child getting a shot, "One..."

The brand pressed down. The scream that left Stan didn't feel human, Stan hardly registered it at all. All he could feel was the horrible crackling sizzle of his arm, how it rolled against his skin, harsh pressure unbearable and never stopping and oh god -

It left him a moment later. Stan gasped, ragged heaves for air around a clogged throat. The skin was wiped once more and Stan shouted hoarsely at the drag of fibers against wound.

He looked at it. He didn't want to but -

51186 in violent blistered pink stared back at him.

Stan wished he could pass out, faint and wake up on Richie's couch - let the fever dream end. He threw up instead. Watery bile painting his shirt as Rory groaned in annoyance.

A bandage was wrapped around it. The stirrup released. Straps removed. Stan cradled his arm to his chest, palm against gauze like he could will it away.

"Oh, wait," Rory said, and two hand gripped Stan's nape before curling him forward. His forehead brushed the table, sweat dampening the paper beneath him. The position didn't allow him to squirm, iron hold and sedative still coursing through him. Another horrible wipe glided along his spine, and Stan nearly shrieked at the idea of metal touching him once more. But instead he felt the pinch of a needle, wide and painful but quick. It left him and another band aid was placed.

The hands on his neck released him, and Stan tentatively reached up to feel the sore spot. A small bump dragged against his fingertips. He darted away from it, throat clogging up once more.

"A tracker," Rory answered, "Not everyone needs to get stuck in a collar forever," The cheer in her voice made Stan want to vomit again.

"How about some fresh clothes," Dr. Geier said, "You slept through showers, but maybe Rory'll make an exception,"

"Nah," Rory said, "You're clean enough. Just on the shirt, spilt milk. C'mon," She tugged Stan to his feet, but they wobbled beneath him. He collapsed to the floor. Both of them staring at him, like they hadn't caused all of this.

Rory reached beneath Stan's arms and hefted him back into standing. He wobbled against her, unwilling to rely on her for balance but unable to move away. He eventually settled into her side as she walked them out of the room with a bright goodbye to Dr. Geier and down into the hall. It was just as empty as it'd been before.

They came to another room, thankfully not far, and Rory eased him down onto a bench before shuffling through some drawers. She looked to her right to another door and turned back to Stan, "If you need to pee or anything, feel free," She gestured, "You can go in there, even shut the door, but they don't lock,"

Stan figured as much, but nodded. It took her a moment to realize he wasn't going to be able to get himself there. She laughed self deprecatingly with a, "Sorry, my bad," Before helping him back up.

Only once the bathroom door clicked behind him did Stan allow himself to cry. Open weeping sobs. He didn't allow himself to cry for long. Sniffling violently as his lower lip juddered. He peed only to spare himself the need to back with his roommate.

The toilet had no water, almost like an elegant porta-potty. It flushed when Stan pressed a button, but the water barely dragged along the edges of the bowl before stopping. When he went to wash his hands he found the sink didn't allow his hands to fit beneath the faucet unless they were flat. There was no stopper, and the bowl was more like a curved plate - hardly an inch deep.

There was a mirror on the wall, beneath a thick layer of plastic. Stan figured if he punched it he'd only hurt his hand. Stan knew, logically, that he'd only been here three days. And if it was close enough to lunch then he'd barely passed seventy two hours.

His hair didn't look any different, only matted with sweat. His stubble had come in slightly, a soft dusting that Beverly had said made him look cute. His clothes, while soiled with vomit, weren't hanging off his frame any more than they'd done before.

He didn't *look* any different. But it felt wrong. He felt stilted. Like this was a version of him that shouldn't be here. In this Center.

This was the captured Stan. The rogue stan. This was 51186.

Stan had adapted to a lot of things in his life. Isolation, self dependence, loss. But the 51186 in the mirror seemed to brittle to bend.

Rory knocked on the door as he stared, breaking him from his spiral. She opened it a moment later, but didn't look concerned that he'd tried anything. Didn't think he could anyway.

"Do a lot of guides try to kill themselves?" Stan asked.

"Well," She hummed, sorting a small pile of clothes, "We've had issues with rogues. You're in the rogue division, for obvious reasons," A small chuckle, a pause like Stan would laugh too, "We room you together so you have a buddy," Stan thought of the maniac who would be sleeping next to him, "Assure your surroundings are safe," The sink he couldn't drown himself in, "And keep a close eye to make sure you don't act... irrationally," The collar pressed as he swallowed.

A tee shirt, soft pants, briefs, and socks - all gray - were handed to him. Stan waited a moment, considered going back to the bathroom, before finally changing in front of her.

"Those are your sleep clothes. Normally you'd be dressed nicer, but you look like you need a nap," She said, "When you change you'll either be picked up and brought here or have your clothes brought to you. We gotta make sure you aren't hiding anything irrational,"

Stan finished changing quickly, too drained to stew in her sharp gaze. She handed him a pair of slippers, and took his arm back over her shoulder to walk them both back to his room.

“Breakfast is at seven, lunch at noon, dinner at six. You’ll be granted different privileges with good behavior, but you’ll need to talk with - oh,”

A man stood at the end of the hall, easy long strides approaching the two of them. He was tapping away at a tablet before looking up. Stan stiffened, making Rory stumble as he refused the next step. The blue eyed man. The guide.

“Robert,” Rory greeted.

“I’ll be taking him now,” He simply said, smile wide. Eyes impossibly bright.

Rory didn’t argue, didn’t seem bothered at all, as she slipped from beneath Stan. Robert came up, towering over him, and offered his arm like a gentleman. Stan swayed where he was, not willing to pass himself off to the beast he knew this man was.

But his ankles shook, balance tilting.

c ' mon , be a sport , stanley .

Stan took the offering.

Robert smiled, “Let’s talk.”

Notes for the Chapter:

t-t-t-two new players enter the ring. poor stan.

lemme know what you think, what you think is gonna happen, and if it sucked!

12. шароит

When faced with... Robert once again; Stan had anticipated some kind of physical altercation. Saccharine smiles with benevolent ends. He wasn't sure what exactly it would entail, just that it would be cruel. But. Robert was not.

Maybe the entire situation before had just been violence itself. Robert had not touched him more than a caress. It had been horrible, terrifying, but not actually an assault. It had been deeper than flesh, confrontation unnecessary when an echoed suggestion had knocked him unconscious. Rendering him helpless where batons and collars and Greta had failed.

Stan supposed Robert didn't *need* to be, which was a cruelty in its own right. Simply guiding Stan through gray halls, even gently tutting at the bandage around his wrist. Like a doting parent. Like he cared.

He'd called him Stanley. In his mind, rattling message through his nerves. But still. Stanley.

Not rogue. Not 51186.

Which was, as his roommate instructed, against the rules.

Stan could still feel his voice in this throat, not forced deep into him as his soul sank like before. But he didn't want to test his luck. Raw skin still too fresh. So he followed him, pretending in the recesses of his mind it was of his own volition.

The room they landed at was an unnatural blend of regal and clinical. Thick tufted furniture sat in the center, rich green velvet shining in the soft light. It was a high rise chair with a small matching ottoman and chaise. A jug of water sat on a small table between them. An antique gramophone was tucked beside the armchair. A plush rug sat beneath it all, with antique lampshades creating an entirely detached atmosphere from its surroundings. It felt like a therapist's office, like housewives could faint on the chaise as an old man jotted down their woes.

But the room itself was massive. The entire thing looked unfinished. High ceilings and exposed beams. Sharp edges and nothing nailed down. Nowhere else had contained so many resources to die. The walk to the 'office' in the warehouse like room seemed too long, too spaced out. Stan's slippered feet slapping lightly against overly polished concrete. The room had a strong smell of bleach. Stan tried not to dwell on it.

They finally reached the velvet oasis. Robert set a record to play. It was the only one, no other sleeves in sight. A gentle piano began to play, plucking the beginnings of Clair de Lune.

"Well, Stanley my boy, I'm sure you have a question or two," Robert leered, voice tinkling in an eerie echo.

Stan had a question or two - or a thousand. But he bit back the first few *How dare you's* and *don't touch me's*, arm pulsing in a steady stinging reminder of what this place was capable of. Stan settled on a reasonable, not confrontative, half plead when a matted head of brown hair peaked from under the table.

"Who the fuck is that?" Stan gasped, unable to stop as the body spasmed, twitching in a fetal position. Stan reached for him but a sharp clap stilled his hand in the air.

"*Hmm?*" Robert asked, like he hadn't stopped Stan himself, twisting to look beneath him as he sprawled in his chair, balanced precariously on the edge, "Oh, *Eddie* boy. Don't worry," A gasped sob spit out of the boy, "He's alright,"

He didn't look alright, he looked like he was barely alive. Stan's eyes flicked back to him as his hand curled back against his chest, brows furrowing as the boy - Eddie - jerked, gasping like there was something clogging his airways.

"Has to learn," Robert supplied, steepled fingers balancing his chin. His eyes rolled over Eddie, unblinking as he muttered, "Has to learn, has to *learn*... gotta be a big boy, my Eds. Grow up *fast, faster still*. Can't just float along the bank. Deep end, deep end,"

His eyes flicked back to Stan. Stan jolted, tense with the wide gaze of

Robert boring into him. The hairs at his nape stood up, teeth clenched as neither seemed to breathe. Stan sure wasn't.

"You'll go to the deep end," Robert whispered, smile pinching dimples into his cheeks, "You've already got a few under your belt, don'tcha, Stanley?"

Stan's throat clicked, a pregnant pause as Robert seemed to wait for a response, "We're not supposed to use our names," Stan said instead, voice lilting up with nerves.

Robert's face froze, suspended animation as he gazed at Stan. Then he began to laugh, childish and loud, booming off the unfinished walls. He curled in on himself, overcome with giggles, a mocking reflection of Eddie curled at the ground between them.

The laugh trickled away, and Robert made a show of wiping a tear away before answering, "Oh, Stanley, Stanley, *Stanley*," Stan hated how his name sounded coming from him, "Does this look like the rest of The Center to you? Look like your little room with your little bed and its little straps? No. This is... *my* room. I'm in charge of you kiddos, all my little wards," Stan didn't mention how he'd just turned twenty six.

"So you're in charge?" Stan asked.

"No, no, no," Robert sighed, "Guides can't be in charge. Too volatile, too weak minded, too... simple. No, I'm just your watcher, your gatekeeper, your... buddy," He smiled again, "Don'tcha wanna be buddies, Stanley?"

Stan did not fucking want that. Eddie wheezed on the floor.

He nodded.

"Good," Robert hummed, seeming to settle into himself, much more the man he'd seen in Richie's living room, "Good... So, house rules," He lifted a finger, "First, that number on your wrist? Your identity. They'll smile and coo and treat you sweet if you're a good kid but that number is all you are anymore. Though, it seems you already picked up on that, probably Patrick - little menace -"

“Why don’t you have a number?” Stan asked, nearly biting through his tongue at how Robert’s eyes cut back to him.

Robert smiled, and showed his clean, unmarred wrists, “Recent addition, my idea. Guides can be so hard to spot, y’know? Especially those tricky little rogues, natural wallflowers. We always used numbers, Sentinels are free to rename when they pick one up. But why put a name to a face, hmm? Especially if you gotta be able to put it down,”

Put it down? Guides were rare, unexpendable, ever since the Trouble. They weren’t treated like citizens, Stan knew that, but...

The brand stretched as he twisted the hem of his shirt. Wrinkling it in a way that was sure to upset him later.

They were nothing more than animals. Marked like cattle.

“Now, second, training. All rogues are guides but not all guides are rogues. We gotta deal with the brats as they come, and you, Stanley - will need proper education. You will meet with me, once a day, for rehabilitation,” Stan looked down at Eddie, who had fallen unnaturally still, “Rogues need a special touch, a firm hand to help them come home,”

Stan genuinely couldn’t tell if Robert *meant* anything he was saying. It was theatrical, how he illustrated imprisonment - full of indulgence. Robert was a guide, right? Yet he was part of all this. A big part. Eddie quivered between their feet.

Robert seemed to enjoy *that* , at the very least.

pay attention , stanley .

It hit him like a slap. The muscles of his eyes burning from how fast his gaze met Robert’s own. He tried to blink. His eyes just watered.

“Deep end, Stanley,” Robert tutted, “No slacking at the bank, no floating by on me,”

Stan nodded, eyes pinned where they’d landed, and the tension behind them eased if only a bit. A shaking breath left him.

Robert wasn't physical.

He was so much worse.

"Three," Robert continued, "You will keep yourself presentable. Normally you'll be in the finest of wears with those curls... hmm," He pulled one, letting it spring back into Stan's forehead, the panic of having him so close was the only thing that kept Stan from flinching away, "Might need a shave, huh, Stanley?" The hand grabbed Stan's cheeks, squishing his face as Stan's gaze was still held firm, "They like 'em young, can't lie. You've got a baby face, Eds too, so that'll work at least."

The grip left Stan, a gasp of relief heaving before he could control it. His eyes burned, dried out in the vintage dusky lights.

"Number, training, clothing; easy. Easy peasy," Robert giggled, too fractured to quite be a proper laugh, "Now, dinner is coming up and there's a little pill bug on my rug that needs sweeping," His foot tapped Eddie, who nearly curled off the floor in retaliation, "So how 'bout we finish this chit chat, hmm?" Palms up, extended, offering.

Stan opened his mouth, but no sound came. He blinked, realized he could blink, and rubbed his eyes until they felt right again. But nothing felt *right* - nothing about this was right. He was in a room with a - a maniac and what looked like a violent coma patient, about to be sent to a different room with a different maniac who would hold him down again and his arm was *cooked* and -

The tears weren't a surprise. Not really. Stan was more just stunned he had the moisture to spare.

"Now don't look *glum*, Stanley my boy," Robert tipped forward, tie dangling over Eddie's shivering body. Stan watched it sway, ticking a silk woven metronome, "This is an opportunity. All this time you've been *wasting* away without realizing how *special* you are. So afraid of the dark, hiding in plain sight, feeling *weak* when there's so much potential you're just ignoring. All the *Trouble* , after all," Robert said it like a slur, "There aren't enough guides to supply the incoming generation, let alone the ones still crawling about. Trouble, trouble, all the guides caused Trouble!"

Sentinels had, actually. The guides just died over it.

How like them to write their own damnation.

“But, hey,” He smiled at Stan, “Sterilization didn’t take recessive genes into account. All those Leveled and Sentinels running around with the guide gene pumping into their little offspring. Staying dormant and hidden until *bam!*” His hands slammed into the table, nearly toppling it onto Eddie, “A miracle baby! And you, Stanley, are a miracle,”

Stan didn’t think any part of him was a miracle. He was the result of persecuted recessive genetics that had paired in just a way that made him a target. His DNA had stripped him of his rights, left to be thrown to a pit of Sentinels scrambling for relief from their own hubris.

Palms dragged across the table, a high squeak as the skin dragged against grain, “And there is *nothing*,” The hands found Stan’s knees, “I hate *more*,” dragging up along his flank until Stan’s throat was cradled, “Than a wasted effort.”

Stan froze, pulse pounding as his lungs begged for air. Robert was all he could see, manic blue eyes staring at him, into him, through him. Something splintered in Stan. A haggard breath sucked between chattering teeth.

“I want to go home,” Stan cracked.

“Oh, buddy,” Robert cooed, “That isn’t going to happen.”

It was, at least, the first honest thing he’d heard.

Eddie was - dropped didn’t seem like the right word - *aggressively placed* into Stan’s arms. Robert made it clear he didn’t like wasted effort, and Eddie seemed to be “Nothing but, lately,” So Eddie curled

in Stan's arms, the latter nearly sweating to keep him upright after all the whiplash of the last few hours. Robert had let him cry for about ten seconds before a sharp clap smacked next to his ear. He didn't need another wasted effort on his hands, and Eddie was a solid enough poster boy for repercussions to get Stan to swallow his sobs.

Stan had almost requested an orderly to take him, to free his wrist from chafing against bandages as Eddie squirmed and wheezed. Robert even offered as he strolled next to them both. But the idea of throwing him to someone like Rory set Stan's hair on end.

It might've been a test, the way Robert's eye glinted when Stan refused. But it didn't feel right either way. So Stan shifted his grip, and wobbled on.

Eddie was tiny, freckled skin coating his arms and face. The dots were fading, mismatched patchworks of coloration and depth, like he didn't get enough sun to sustain anymore. He didn't look any older than Stan, but his stature and round face made it hard to tell. Stan guessed his eyes were massive, if he'd ever open them.

He seemed out of whatever terror he'd been in but shivering with aftershocks. His polo untucked from his beltless khakis. He didn't have a collar, same as Stan's roommate. A small piece of his hairline was shaved away, along his nape.

One thing that did seem remarkably out of place was a fanny pack. It was tightly strapped to his hips, with a key along the buckle. He wouldn't be able to get it off himself, no chance of a noose - Stan supposed.

The hallway was still barren, but all the doors were open - save a few. Open access seemed like a delusion, but actually seeing the endless sets of beds at least made him feel less alone. The thought felt cruel, to be happy he wasn't the only person in this hell. He squeezed Eddie tighter.

They came across a door, Robert's clicking heels ceasing as Stan stumbled to not walk ahead - not give any reason for the collar around his neck to go off or whatever alternative Robert found suitable. The room was hardly remarkable, blending to the wall

around it. Maybe that made it harder to run; no sense of direction beyond a few offices.

The room was identical to Stan's own, but only one bed looked touched. He placed Eddie there, attempting to prop him up before simply letting him lie down. Stan hadn't liked lying on his bed, but then again the cuffs probably hadn't helped.

Robert didn't follow them into the room, looming in the entryway, backlit, hair glowing as strands escaped the manicured quaff. He simply smiled at Stan, then dropped his gaze to Eddie's prone form.

The ease wasn't directed at Stan, but some horrible ripple shot through him regardless as Eddie's eyes flew open, a noiseless gasp retching from his throat. Just the proximity was enough. Robert looked satisfied at that, amused as he bowed and turned away. Stan allowed himself to breathe then, no immediate threat in his peripherals. Eddie seemed to find Stan threatening enough, the back of a hand connecting solidly to Stan's ear as he toppled off the bed. Eddie's eyes darted wildly around him as Stan shook off the ringing in his nerves.

"Wait, I'm," Another hand flew out, Stan dodged in lieu of intercepting. Grabbing would only make it worse, "I'm - it's okay," It really wasn't, Eddie didn't look like he believed him either, "I - Eddie," Stan stressed, voice a whisper around forbidden syllables.

Eddie paused at that, but didn't still, too full of nervous ticking energy. Which seemed to be a stunning contradiction to the rest of him. He looked ill, almost. Exhaustion seeping from his pores, yet unable to let himself rest. His eyes flicked between Stan's own, going from desperate to questioning. He didn't say anything.

Stan tried again, now that flailing - and surprisingly strong - limbs were out of the equation, "R-Robert made me carry you," Eddie flinched at the name, "I don't know what's going on, I -"

Eddie moved and Stan braced for impact. But all he did was unzip his fanny pack, a small notepad and pen tucked inside. He flipped a few pages, before scribbling inside it

NAME

“I... mine?”

YES

“Stan,” He offered, “Stanley. I’m Stanley,” Eddie nodded, and Stan nodded back, “Do you have a roommate?”

NO

SOLITARY

“That almost sounds nice,” Stan hummed, images long black hair taunting over him.

WHO IS YOUR’S

“Uh, 161 - something,” He guessed, “Black hair, tall, psychotic,”

PATRICK

The name felt too formal to suit him, but Stan nodded in thanks at that. There were too many numbers to track, “Yeah, Patrick,”

KILLED PEOPLE

“He said so, yeah,” Stan whispered. He didn’t mention how Patrick had known Stan had as well.

Eddie’s eyes flicked to his wrist, frown deepening at the bandage there. He went to write before stopping. The pen tapped the page, ink digging through layers until he grunted and nearly ripped through the paper with,

HOW DID THEY CATCH YOU

Stan didn’t know. It had been too fast, too blurry in his head, out of focus around the horribly sharp image of Greta. “I was in a house, a Sentinel - Richie. I think someone followed us, maybe?”

RAT

“Who, Ri... No. No, that isn’t,”

SENTINEL

“Yeah, but,”

Eddie underlined the last two lines. A snarl across his face. His hand smacked the page when Stan sat up with a rage in his eyes. The echo made them both jump. Stan looked at Eddie’s wrist, shaking from how he white knuckled the page. 54495.

“You’re the one who tried to kill Ben,”

Eddie, for the first time since Stan had seen him writhing on the rug, was still. Completely, horribly still. His eyes widened. He went to write, but Stan was already speaking.

“You suffocated him, I saw him at the hospital - “ The notebook was shoved into Stan’s face.

HE’S ALIVE?

The text was ambiguous in intention. Whether disappointed or hopeful, Stan couldn’t tell until he looked back at Eddie’s face. He looked nervous, worried. An anger that looked misplaced, jamming to mask whatever war was waging in his mind, spasmed across Eddie’s expression.

“Yeah,” Stan whispered, “Yeah, he’s okay,”

Eddie didn’t sag off the bed, but it was a near thing.

“What... “ Stan hesitated, but Eddie looked at him, nodding to continue, “What happened? Ben said you could talk - before,”

Eddie didn’t write. His eyes distant as Stan worried he’d crossed something. But, they knew each other’s names and that was about the only line there seemed to be here. Eddie eventually wrote, hand soft across the page, ink barely marking.

ROGUE

Stan had figured as much, he’d been in the room with Robert after all. But Eddie nodded at him, and Stan answered, “Y-yeah, I guess,”

THEY'LL GET YOU TOO

"They already did," Stan joked, but it felt cutting on his tongue.

Eddie shook his head, writing furiously as a soft beep echoed through the room.

THEY'LL FIND A REASON
PRETEND YOU EARNED IT

"Earned what?" Stan asked, "What happened to you? Ed -"

A howl left Stan, nearly biting through his own tongue as electricity ravaged through him. Rory stood in the doorway, smaller than Robert had been but no less menacing.

"When you're bad, 51186," She reminded, and grabbed Stan's arm to pull him up off the bed, "Back to rooms after dinner," Stan, still shaking, didn't think it wise to mention they hadn't eaten.

Rory took the notebook from Eddie, scanned the page, and tapped her wristband. Eddie didn't make any noise when he seized, but that made it somehow so much worse.

"Just because you can't talk doesn't mean you can write bad things," She sighed.

Stan watched Eddie try to collect himself as the door slid shut. Rory had kept his notebook. Stan stumbled along beside her, knees shaking as grey doors slid shut around them.

There was no light on in his room. The soft glow of the hallway cutting away as the door slid and clicked behind him. Stan let himself drop back against the door before a small shock shot through him. He jerked away, wobbling against the foot of his bed.

Stan didn't like the dark. Monsters from childhood imaginings that twisted into adolescent paranoia crept in the darkest pieces of seamless surroundings. But the dark didn't have Robert. Or Rory.

"Hey, kiddo,"

It did have Patrick.

Notes for the Chapter:

this really is just becoming a mass of character
introductions fhdsifhdoifh

eds is HERE and he's not SUPER JAZZED ABOUT IT

lemme know what you think, if it sucks, predictions

13. sargs

"I hurt someone before," Stan said, voice muffled against Richie's stripped shirt. The latter groaned with sleep, half awake but trying to be responsive, "When I was a kid,"

"Kids're dicks," Richie mumbled, shifting Stan as they sprawled across the couch.

"No, I," Stan paused long enough for Richie to crack open a sleep crusted eye, "I really hurt him. I -"

"It's okay," Richie hummed, it was easy enough to assume the context by the look on Stan's face, "You were a kid, right?"

"Yeah..." He relented, but seemed nervous still. Richie kissed his forehead, softly biting a brow when Stan snuffled a laugh.

"You were just scared," Richie promised, "No one can hold you to that,"

"Bill could," Stan said, voice barely a mumble.

"Hmm?" Richie said, falling back into sleep already.

"Nothing," Stan said. He pulled Richie closer against him, "Go back to sleep,"

"Oh, that goes without saying," Richie hummed, "Gimme a few hours more before reality has to set in,"

Stan snorted, "Sure thing. All the hours you want, days even,"

They'd gotten nine.

His nose was probably broken. He couldn't really see it, but the pain seemed telling enough, firing shocks of minor agony across his eye sockets. Blood dripped down, puddling against his shirt. Faded stripes discolored with a vibrant red that crusted into maroon. It looked bad which felt extra shitty since that was - had been - a great shirt. The blood wasn't even centered, dribbling along the outer edge of his lip, cocked askew from how his head lolled when he'd passed out. Unsymmetrical contamination.

Stan would've hated it.

Richie licked his upper lip again, tasting pennies as he halfheartedly tried to stop the trickle. It wasn't comfortable, itching as it dried against day old stubble. It cracked when he scrunched his face up enough, but the twing of pain wasn't worth it. He couldn't move to wipe it away, hands cuffed to the chair beneath him. He was too tall for the link allowance and his shoulders pulled taut beneath him. He already didn't come across as broad, he imagined he looked sort of like an actual stick now.

He couldn't even see what a sad sack of shit he must exhibit. The lights in the room were off, leaving Richie in stifling darkness. It had taken what could've been somewhere between an hour or a day - the lack of light was not super in favor of time telling - for Richie's eyes to adjust enough to make out a semblance of shapes. There was a mirror across from him, covering the expanse of the wall. At least, Richie assumed it was a mirror. That or a floating head in his beat-to-shit likeness just sort of... staring at him.

Richie snorted, half formed jokes and characters flitting through his head as he tried to make any of this funny. A bleeding man handcuffed to a chair in the dark, the boy he loved who might've loved him back dragged away in a van while he just watched like a fucking jackass? Hilarious. Standing ovation.

The blood dripped down. It pooled with the rest.

No. Richie supposed it wasn't funny at all.

The lights didn't shoot up around him, but slowly brightened until a soft glow filled the room. It was almost worse - hazy luminosity not

quite making anything in focus or definition.

A door to his right opened, a young man entered the room. He looked young, sleeves rolled up and a tie loose around his neck. His legs seemed abnormally thin, pants fluttering around his calves, never touching skin. The door slid shut behind him. Richie sucked in a breath as he turned to face him. A long scar ran along his face, one brow nearly gone from scar tissue. It curled down past his lip and into the edge of his jaw. He looked like he could've been handsome, somehow still was. His right arm moved stiffly, two fingers missing from that hand, as he carried a packed manilla file.

The dropped two folders between them: one thin one with *Tozier, Richard Wentworth - SENTINEL*, and a significantly thicker one with *Uris, Stanley Thomas - ROGUE 51186* printed neatly along the side. Richie watched him sit, and tried to not stare as he tugged his pant legs up to drop into his chair. Two metal ankles stared back.

"Now," he said, spinning the files to face himself, "Richard 'Richie' Tozier. We both know why you're here. Same page is important," he leaned forward, elbows propping up their head, "Let's agree to no stupid questions, huh? Not waste anyone's time?"

"Sure thing," Richie spit.

"Good," He laughed. He didn't seem menacing, which was off putting in its own way. Friendly almost, buddy like; rolled sleeves and all. If it weren't for the handcuffs and cracked cartilage, Richie could almost pretend they were buds catching up at a bar, "So," The man began, reading through the Richard file, "Knowledge and possession of a rogue - not a great start. But, considering the lack of familial relation and recent coupling, I think we can go with an 'easing influence' since that tends to be the situation," He pat the files, "Rogues can be tricky, get in the head, y'know? We know that you didn't do anything wrong,"

"What are you, a lawyer?" Richie asked.

"No," The man chuckled, sheepishly scratching along his scar, "No law degree. Not bright enough for that, just," He tapped the case files, "Involved in the resolution of this conflict. Normally we'd pass

it off to a court - we'll drop you at a station soon, for discretion only - but given your... status, both in the public eye and genetically, we're trying to keep this from becoming 'a thing'" He even used air quotes. He was effortlessly charming. Richie wanted to punch him. The table was narrow, maybe he could manage a kick to the dick.

"You know," Richie began, blood dripping over his lip, staining his teeth, "If you're going for a good cop interrogation feel - y'usually need a bad cop too. Maybe better lighting, spa ambiance isn't really solid torture vibes,"

"This isn't an interrogation, we're just talking," He said, voice easy.

"Yeah," Richie snorted, "Talking, right," His skin itched, buzzing beneath his pores, "That why you cracked my nose?"

"From the looks of the report, you did that to yourself."

"Because Center reports are probably brimming with factual integrity," Richie laughed. It made his nose ache deeper.

"Well, enlighten me," The man offered. It wasn't even said sarcastically. The dick.

"Yeah, I was really itching to slam my own face into a baton, real fetish of mine. Don't kinkshame me,"

"The famous do tend to have weird fantasies," He laughed, "But harboring a rogue isn't usually one of them,"

"Where is he?"

"I thought we agreed to no stupid questions, Tozier," His hair fell over his eye, "You know he's a murderer, right?"

Richie didn't let his face twitch, "What?"

The man opened the file, flipping a few pages before beginning to read, "Greta Hannah Keene. Age 28. Marked deceased on January 10th, 8:21 AM. Cause," He looked up at Richie, "Ruptured spinal cord,"

Richie didn't remember that. Anything beyond the flashbang had been difficult, only Stan's voice echoing in his head - begging him for... Richie shook his head.

"How do you suppose Stan managed that with four people on top of him?"

He smiled, leaning in like he was sharing a secret, "Do you know what a guide does?"

"They ease," Richie droned, brow lifting.

"No, well - yeah, but, do you know what that actually *means* ?"

"They," The word help came like conditioning, "Y'know you look itching to let me know, don't wanna ruin your reveal,"

The man snorted, "Easing is a label for it. A quick coverall definition. A guide," his right hand reached between them, middle finger poking Richie's forehead. Richie tried to lean away, but his taut arms didn't allow it, "Fluctuates the nerve system. Can stimulate or dull our sensors and functions. They're kids when it starts, volatile and edgy," His throat clicked, eyes going distant, "Uncooperative. But The Center reels that in, we *help* them so they can help us. Give and take,"

"Imprisonment seems like a lot of take," Richie hissed, the other man's nail digging into his skin.

"Well an unchecked guide can only become a rogue," He clucked his tongue, "No limitations set makes it worse, sometimes uncontrollable. Normally they'll level out on their own, plateau their instincts. Fear plays a big part in that, they don't want to get caught -"

"- *Kidnapped* -"

"- So they stagnate until a little slip up and then they're safe and sound with people who can help them. But, rogues like *Stanley* ," The nail edge broke skin, "Just keep getting worse and worse until they're able to make you snap your own neck. Complete control over your nervous system is a big thing, Richie. It bleeds into control and fluctuation of adrenaline, hormones, you fucking name it. He can

make your heart stop, set off a nerve ending so violently your bones snap in reflex, even suppress and negate memories,” Richie must’ve twitched. The hospital closet; Stan had nearly managed that, “Looks like *that* one’s a sore spot. Now,” He laughed, hand retracting, a sheepish smile on his face, “You tell me how that’s safe for anyone,”

Richie thought of Stan - of Stanley. Wild blonde curls and sleepy hazel eyes with an insistent blush freckling his cheeks and nose no matter how hard he denied it. How he’d dote after Bev and Richie, hiding his concern under flat toned insults. How he retorted and snap backed at all of Richie’s jokes with a look like he knew what Richie was always trying to say. How he felt in Richie’s arms, tucked against his chest, snickering into his collar as Richie tried anything to make him laugh. How he was so strong and brave and still so undeservingly kind.

“He killed a woman not hours ago,” The man spit, “A senseless act of violence and unchecked -”

“It sounds,” Richie drawled, dried blood flaking from his chin, “Like she deserved it.”

The man stood up, a look of betrayal in his eyes. Richie just stared at him.

“Stan wouldn’t hurt me,” Richie said, voice calm, even, “Stan wouldn’t hurt anyone who didn’t deserve it. If you viewed him as anything close to a human being you’d see it too.”

“Did he ever tell you about the quarry?”

Richie blinked, “The what?”

The man whipped deeper into the endless file, pages yellowing with age until landing on two school photos, “At age twelve, Stanley Uris has been linked to the attack of a Sentinel,”

“You attack kids all the time, can’t handle the ‘give and take’ of that?”

“The Sentinel was also twelve. Just realizing their abilities, overwhelmed and scared. Turning to their only friend for - for *help*,

and what does Mr. Uris do? Throw him off a cliff,”

“Stan wouldn’t -”

“The Sentinel was fished out of the quarry *eleven hours later*, Stanley didn’t report the ‘accident’ until 7:41 AM. He just sat and w-watched the sunrise before even thinking to help his friend,”

“He was scared,” Richie defended.

“They both were!” The man boomed, Richie flinched away, “They were - they w-w-were kids, a-and he let him f-fall! He p-p-pushed him!” The man bent across the table until he was all Richie’s peripherals could see, “The moment St-Stanley Uris realized w-w-what he was he used it for violence. He attacked and a-attempted to murder a child w-who didn’t know what was happening.”

“How the fuck would you know that?” Richie hissed, “Did you even think to ask him?”

“I remember the rocks b-below well enough to n-n-not need a statement,” The man spit.

Richie started, eyes widening as the man backed up, adjusting his tie, collecting the files, “You -”

“Rogue investig-gator Bill Denbrough,” He said, eyes distant and cold, stutter fading as he collected himself. A phone chimed sharply in the suffocating silence that followed. Bill reached into his pocket and sighed, “Your bail was placed at \$400,000 and paid. There’s someone waiting for you in the front. You’re free to go.”

“What about Stan?” Richie demanded, shoulders straining as he tried to follow.

“Considering this interview,” Bill said, voice slow and deliberate as he worked through the lapse in diction, “And your open objection and detestation to the guide community -”

“- I’m disgusted with *you* -”

“- Plus accepting your public image as a drug addict in lieu of owning

up to your birthright. You are unfit to possess the rogue 51186,”

“He has a name,” Richie spit, “He has a fucking name and you know it - you *know him* -!”

“He’s an enemy of the state,” Bill said, “And I’m not going to let him hurt anyone else.

The door slid open, Richie heard a sickening pop as he tried to throw himself forward. The chair was bolted down.

Bill turned back as the door slid shut, the easy smile from before no longer meeting his eyes.

“I’ve suffered enough because of him.”

No one came to let him out, whether to make him calm down or stew in his rage - Richie wasn’t sure. But eventually he was slowly guided away from the room. He looked for Bill, but the asshole was nowhere to be seen. The sterile interrogation suite which lead to a blank hallway finally opened to a nearly cozy front room. Potted plants scattered about with bobble heads lining a receptionist’s desk. She wore a cardigan and no body armor. The guard hadn’t even followed him through the doors. Leaving him standing dumbly like he’d wandered through a portal.

Chase was fiddling with his phone on a faded love seat, probably playing some game he needlessly dumped money into. He didn’t even look up, holding out a finger until finally standing and walking out the blinds covered door with an oddly confident gait.

“Thanks for the bail,” Richie mumbled, steps heavy as he followed him to a town car.

“Your money,” He scoffed, and hopped into the back. Richie looked up at the building, blindly hoping it was The Center, that he could

map a way back into where the floors stopped having windows.

He was greeted with a bland brick complex, isolated in the middle of a town that probably had ten streets, three stories with multiple businesses plastered along glass doors and overhangs. Tax filing offices and office supply stores. The doors they just left were labelled *Henderson & Park*. No indication of what went on inside.

“Annoying remote location,” Chase complained, “All off the grid with their bullshit, you better. Make sure your accountant is good so your taxes don’t go to this,” He waved dismissively in the direction of the building as Richie climbed in.

Richie didn’t have a response, the fight drained out of him at Bill’s threat. It couldn’t have been anything but one. The itch in his skin persisted, spreading along veins and nerves until he felt coated. He was shakier than usual, unable to decide if it was shock or whatever else. Stan would’ve fixed it. He had to get to The Center, fill out all those forms he’d thrown away. There had to be a few loopholes at least -

“Had your fun then?” Chase asked, back to his phone.

“What?” Richie asked.

“We’ll get you a new one,” Chase promised, “Clean, behaved, proper. Red carpet cute, I swear. Set those jitters to rest - Christ, you look like a tweaker. Clean your face,” He tossed a handkerchief to Richie. It just fell to his lap.

“What fun?” He asked again.

“With the rogue,” Chase scoffed, “I’d hoped you’d have at least gotten laid for your trouble. That nose isn’t even made for radio. All that fucking cuddling, unbelievable,”

The building hadn’t stated rogue business on it. How had he known to come here? To pay bail before he’d been placed in a jail? They wouldn’t have said anything to Chase. Not if they were keeping it quiet like Bill had said. Static began to buzz in the back of Richie’s skull, jaw moving as he tried to - tried to -

“What are you talking about?”

“The feed was just,” He shook his head, “I mean, it had to be done.”

“*What* had to?” Richie insisted, the ringing in his ears becoming deafening. The itch beneath his skin like sandpaper. Chase’s voice was barely audible.

“The only way to get you into the public eye is just being open about it. A junkie doesn’t make anyone look good. And a rogue is even worse,”

No, they’d - they’d be followed, the raid had come out of nowhere, “What the fuck did you do?” Richie gasped.

“What we both needed, man,” Chase sighed, “There was already a case building, suits showing up at my door when those photos leaked. Just a few bugs in the house to keep the moths company.”

“You bugged my house -”

“- And *you* handed over a rogue and can finally register for a proper guide! Bad image behind you, nothing says good behavior like bringing one of those ‘home’, right? Get that funky head of yours together, big leagues kid - we’ll be back in the game!”

Richie could taste bile.

“Stop the car.”

“Rich - man, c’mon,”

“Stop the car.”

“It’s just a ro-”

“Stop the *fucking* car!”

The driver must’ve heard him through the partition, voice booming with a splintering crack. The car swerved right, both of them sliding in their seats as it came to an abrupt stop. Chase jumped at it and looked, for the first time, actually concerned. He should be fucking

concerned - Richie was going to *kill him* -

His fist cracked down into Chase's eye socket before his brain could bother to keep up, knuckles and cheek both splitting skin until a sharp *crack* rang through the suffocating space. Chase was shouting. Richie couldn't even hear him. The windows just showed desert, endless shrubs and vacant sky.

He punched once, twice more - something in Chase's face was *definitely* broken, before kicking the door open. The seatbelt strangled Chase before he could manage to unclip it as Richie threw him out of the car.

"Don't you fucking -!"

The door slammed shut in his face. Richie kicked the partition and the driver sped off again.

Richie didn't look back at Chase. He couldn't even breathe. The buzzing in his bones insatiable as his nerves fired off. Everything was too bright, too loud, too much too much too much -

Richie finally inhaled on a sob. His shoulders dropped, cradling his eyes with bloody hands as he cried. He squeezed his head, begging for sympathy from the strain. But none came. Stan wasn't there.

Stan wasn't there.

The driver dropped him at The Falcon. Richie didn't remember asking to go there, but the car skidded away the moment his feet touched pavement. He couldn't find it in himself to feel bad about it. The marquee lights were blinding. Light spreading like fire across the walls. He squeezed his eyes shut, fingers spasming until he forced them into fists.

Beverly met him at the door, hair wild and grease streaked like she

hadn't showered. Her eyes were manic, wide as she ran to him.

"Where is he?" She asked, voice hushed and stilted.

"He -" Richie swallowed, voice rough from screaming, "Gone."

Bev stepped back, hands tightening on his shoulders. It hurt. It hurt so much, fingers like needles against his hot skin even with layers between, "What do you mean gone? What did you do?"

Mike met them as Richie's silence stretched on, "Not here," He hissed, and pulled the three of them into the back room. Beverly's grip didn't leave Richie, "Where is Stan?" Mike asked calmly, but his shoulders were taut.

Richie looked at the blood on his own shirt. Askew and foul and wrongwrongwrong.

"He's gone. They took him."

"He was with you," Beverly insisted.

"I know." Richie said.

"Why didn't you *do* something?"

"Beverly," Mike tried, but the redhead released Richie only to slam her fists against his chest.

"You should've *helped* him - He trusted you," A bubbling sob was wetting her voice, words thick as she hit him over and over.

"I'm sorry," Richie gasped, too many synapses firing as he collapsed to the ground. Beverly followed, nearly shrieking as she smacked him again and again.

Richie's skin was on fire, noise blurring into a cacophony of slurs. Bev's hair too sharp, crystallized fire whipping too fast as his eyes watered from more than just the hits. He didn't try to stop her, even as his nose split open once more, filling his nostrils with a horrible copper. Mike was trying to pull her off, but even as her body was lifted kicks shot down into his stomach.

The ringing in his ears was visible now. A dingy creep against his peripherals that sank deeper and deeper into a horrible black. Beverly faded from view, only static coating his corneas as his eyes rolled back.

Maybe she'd let him die. Unable to claw his way up, out of the assault.

He hadn't helped when Stan tried.

A sharp stabbing filled his nostrils, fragrance punching past the blood and making everything come to horrible adrenaline fussed clarity with a *pop*. Mike was above him, smelling salts shoved beneath Richie's nose. Beverly was across the room, crouched in a chair. Her shoulders were heaving. She wouldn't look at him.

"Are you alright?" Mike asked softly. Richie just cracked through a laugh.

"When did he get taken?" Beverly rasped.

"This morning," Richie mumbled, unable to lift his head from the carpet quite yet, "There was a guide there, another one. I couldn't move,"

Beverly stared at him. He didn't see mercy in her eyes.

"That's not your fault," Mike consoled.

"I watched him," Richie gasped, tears cutting down to his hairline, "I watched him scream. He tried to get me to move, but - there -"

"We get it," Beverly said, soft voice, "It's," Her throat clicked, "We get it."

Richie wobbled upright, Mike's hands warm but suffocating against him, "I don't -" He gagged, head lolling. This felt like the withdrawals people always claimed he'd had. Skin crawling, eyes hot, even his hair hurt, "We can't leave him there," He begged them both, "We need to get him out. We need to," Bring him home, "Save him - he'll die in there,"

“Richie,” Mike hushed. Richie flinched in his grip and Mike pulled back, only trying to steady him as Richie babbled.

“He’ll die - we,” He gasped for air, lungs flitting between contractions, “We need to save him,”

Beverly crossed the room, and Richie nearly begged for a hit that could knock him out. Instead, she cupped his cheek, thumb dragging through crackled blood.

“We will.”

Notes for the Chapter:

how about that spicy POV switch up hoifhsfios

please leave a comment, lemme know what you think - if it sucks and all that.

thank you noelle for talking in my ear promising to send me hate mail so all my predictions could come true

14. alleviare

Notes for the Chapter:

hi, dudes. i'm so sorry this update took so long. i got slammed in real life and have been trying to be super on top of that. i'll update this soon, for sure. it'll be a max two week per update from now on.

anyway, enjoy! or don't! i don't own you.

Eddie might be the rudest and funniest person Stan had ever met. He'd probably be even ruder if he could talk.

They'd given him a pen, which Stan had thought originally to avoid the need to sharpen a pencil. But it had been for permanence. Eddie couldn't erase what he wrote. So he could be punished just as if he'd said it. At least every third response to *anything* Stan said was met with a quick flick to his notebook, then a lengthy pause as he debated the repercussions of his word choice, then a small, HA, in place of whatever he'd meant.

It felt like a secret language, Eddie's expressions bridging the language barrier to occasionally even make Stan snort on a laugh and forget where they were.

It had been a week. Technically ten days, but Stan didn't count when he was unconscious both because he hadn't been aware and he didn't want to add time to his imprisonment. Eddie was a solace here. He reminded Stan of Beverly in a lot of ways, sharp and funny, even when he couldn't voice it. Stan could see why Ben liked him so much. Eddie asked about him, about what he did, where he worked - mainly drank whiskey and an architect, respectively. It was sweet how enamored Eddie seemed to be, though he became prickly if Stan pointed that out.

The days would almost bleed together if Stan weren't so hyper aware of his surroundings. Sleep, avoid Patrick until Rory showed up, try to avoid Rory touching him as he changed, breakfast, Robert, lunch, Eddie, dinner, sleep again.

Eddie was undoubtedly part of the schedule. He was directly brought to his room, there was no question to it. It made them jumpy around each other for the first few days, both thinking the other to be a mole. But Robert of all people explained that roommates were designed to control impulsive behavior in guides. Stan wasn't meshing with his own and Eddie didn't have one due to 'outbursts' so the two had been paired simply to keep each other from going insane.

There were other guides, at least three dozen in their sector alone, but he only saw them during meals. And no one spoke during those. Too nervous to set someone in uniform off.

There were tests intermingled in the schedule too. Follow up medical exams, psychological tests, even a learning assessment. They'd looked a little annoyed that Stan had done well at the last one, since most guides didn't get a seventh grade education if caught in a timely manner, let alone a year of college.

Robert's tests were the worst though. He'd push and ease his way into Stan's psyche, rooting around in his head until Stan thought he would die. Frozen or seizing on the floor, unable to control his own actions. He was simply told to stop fighting. It seemed counter intuitive, and Stan had said as much in a strangled gasp before being sent back under.

Eddie told him that that would stop soon. It was a fear tactic. Stan pointed out that fear tactics didn't normally involve actual damage, just threats. Eddie snorted like he was an idiot.

DOES ANYTHING ABOUT THIS PLACE SEEM ETHICAL

Stan assumed he'd gotten punished for that when they reviewed his book. But Eddie'd looked too proud for Stan to damper it.

Robert's training would morph into more of a conversational tone, with the torture being used as a repercussion if disobedient.

HE TRAINS US FOR SENTINELS
TO LISTEN TO ORDERS

“Can you... *ease* what you want to say to me?” Stan offered, “Like put the thought in my head?”

WE'RE NOT TELEPATHS DUMBASS

Stan laughed. Eddie wheezed a strange sort of snicker.

YOU'LL START SESSIONS SOON

The idea of random Sentinels who bought into this whole system coming to try and buy Stan was not something Stan was keen to begin. Jury was still out on if Robert or that would be worse. Eddie went to screenings sometimes. He usually came back exhausted, wobbling and twitching in aftershocks of disobedience.

Stan liked to think he wouldn't give in either, would resist even when hell came crashing down on him. But Stan thought he would break first. Too stiff and uncentered to bend anymore.

He'd confided in Eddie about it a few days before, about how he felt shaky and heavy at the same time. How his chest ached like when he'd first met Richie but instead of easing, the tug only felt harsher with each breath. BOND DROP Eddie had written. Richie was probably feeling it too. But Stan didn't mention Richie around Eddie anymore. Eddie would just write RAT until Stan walked out.

Stan needed Eddie too much to risk building a wall between them.

“Have you seen Ben at all?”

OFF HIS LIST

“But you're compatible, right? Compatibility outweighs everything,”

ATTEMPTED MURDER CARRIES WEIGHT TOO

“... he knows you didn't mean it,” Stan said, “He didn't blame you,”

HE SHOULD

“Did you mean it?” Stan pressed. Eddie stared at the wall for a long moment.

NO

“He knows that. He was worried about you,” They both sat, knees pressed against each other as they huddled close so Stan wouldn’t be heard into the hallway, “Why did you attack him?”

ANGRY

“Quick question, are you capable of writing complete sentences?”

Eddie flipped him off. He kept the notebook tight to his chest, scribbling with a sneer at Stan that just made him smile.

I WAS UPSET WITH WHAT HAPPENED. HE WAS THE FIRST SENTINEL I SAW AND I LASHED OUT WITHOUT THINKING. I DIDN’T EVEN REALIZE I’D DONE IT UNTIL HE WAS ON THE FLOOR. I DIDN’T MEAN FOR IT TO BE HIM, BUT I JUST NEEDED TO HURT SOMEONE.

“Can you tell me what happened?” Stan asked.

Eddie hesitated, not going to the notebook but instead gesturing to his neck. He shook his head and put down the pen. Stan nodded; it wasn’t anything he could write down. Eddie tried to mouth words, but Stan couldn’t decipher what exactly he was trying to say.

“Your neck? You don’t have a collar, neither does Patrick,” Stan guessed, Eddie nodded, gesturing more fervently, “Collars go on rogues, why did they remove it?”

Eddie shook his head.

“Did you not have one at all? Ben said you did,”

Eddie began to smack the back of his neck, mouth moving too fast for Stan to attempt to understand.

“Eddie, calm down, I don’t know what you’re trying to say-” Eddie finally stopped, tears building in his eyes that swam with frustration and rage. He finally took the pen again and grabbed Stan’s wrist.

In thin letters he wrote along his forearm,

PROCEDURE

Eddie was furiously wiping the word away with a spit licked thumb, eyes on the door. Only a blue smudged *P* remained when Rory walked in to collect Stan.

“What’s this?”

Stan didn’t need to look down to see Rory inspecting the smudge across his ever paling skin. He hardly got sunlight before being locked up, in a month he’d be translucent.

“Nothing,”

“51186,” She pressed in her horrible parental tone. She couldn’t be more than a year older than him, if she was older than him at all.

“I was looking at his notebook, I got ink on myself. It was wet. Transferred onto me,”

“Who?” and if that wasn’t a fucking test.

“I don’t remember his number,” Stan insisted, “They’re hard to remember. I get them mixed up,”

She seemed to drop it, after whatever guilt she was looking for in Stan’s eyes came up empty, “Aw, it’s alright, 51186,” She even ruffled his hair. The bitch, “Let’s go, clothes off,”

The showers were harder than Stan wanted to admit since in the grand scheme of fresh hell it should’ve been a minor thing. Guides weren’t trusted with anything that could lead to *irrational* behavior including razors, water, or anything considered poisonous.

So instead of being allowed to disrobe and bathe in privacy, they were instead blasted with hoses against a tile wall. They were given

just enough shampoo directly onto their scalps to clean themselves, allowed to scrub themselves, and then sprayed down again.

Stan loved baths. They were a seldom cathartic allowance he'd let himself enjoy. He'd said as much to Eddie after the first shower, still shaking from humiliation. Eddie had said they'd get baths when they had a session, more assured sanitation and attempted relaxation to put the guides at ease. Eddie half mimed and Stan half guessed until Eddie had been able to explain that he thought they put drugs in the water. Calm them down enough to be open to a bond.

The cold water struck Stan's exposed back, making him jolt as he kept his hands flat to the tiled wall. He bit his lip, squeezing his eyes shut until the spray stopped and the chill settled into his skin. Rory approached with the towel, letting him dry himself. She wouldn't shave his face today, not enough stubble to be noticable. But tomorrow he'd probably have to.

He hoped she'd knick him, just enough to be suspected of trying to kill him. Have her vanish. The thought used to disturb him. But then she'd laugh at his expression of and shaking shoulders and he'd just wish he could kill her himself.

As it turned out, the bath *was* worse. A foggy haze settled against Stan's eyelids, having nothing to do with the steam in the room. Or maybe that's where the drugs were. Stan tried to hold his breath.

"Stop that." Rory whipped him sharply with the rag.

He exhaled.

Despite Eddie's warning, not being put under by Robert was nearly as disturbing as just passing out. Hazy consciousness didn't suit the industrial walls enclosed around faux comfort. He felt like a school boy, pressed shirt and slacks - no belt, of course - and soft slip on shoes. Robert smiled when he'd come in, delighted at the attempted pomade through Stan's curls. Rory had ripped a comb through his curls until Stan was sure his scabs would reopen. A few did.

"Well," Robert sighed, "Don't you clean up nice?"

"Thanks," Stan mumbled, unsure of what else to say, not wanting to let a silence linger.

With Robert's blessing, Stan was shuffled away to an elevator. It was down a few seemingly endless halls and no lack of locked doors. Rory guided him because of course she did. Stan didn't know if her position was its own form of torture, psychologically breaking him with a constant spector lurking to shuffle him blindly through halls.

The elevator was a glass tube, seamlessly sliding down, down, down until Stan found himself in a new setting. The color palette didn't change much, but the prison hospital faded away to what felt like a comfortable lounge. Plush leather sofas and armchairs were scattered about with potted plants dangling from the ceiling. A receptionist with a sleek dress and even sleeker bun sat at a circular desk, typing away as Rory pushed Stan back into motion.

The room was on the other side of a glass wall, soundproofed as Stan was lead around a corner. The glass wall gave way to granite slabs, aesthetically arranged to seem effortlessly chic. The opposite wall held ten doors, innocuous and unlabelled. Rory opened the seventh door, and held it open for Stan to follow.

It was spartan compared to the lobby and hallway. Two chairs with a single table between them. It felt more like an interrogation room than... well, Stan supposed that's sort of what it was.

"Now," Rory chirped, startling Stan, "You've got..." She flicked across her watch, "Fourteen Sentinels to meet with today. We start with top priority, more severe cases, then we get into the up and coming in the list. You'll sit - here," She pushed Stan into the chair

facing away from the door, “And keep your palm up on the table. They’ll come in, grab your hand, and we see if it works out. If there’s a *spark* then we go from there. Sound good?”

No. “Sure.”

“Great, I’ll have them bring the first one in.”

Rory ruffled his hair and left the room. The door swished shut lightly behind her.

The first one to come in was a man. Probably in his late forties. Severe part along his black hair and suit pressed to near concern. Stan’s hand tried to twitch away, but his grip was harsh around his wrist.

Stan felt nothing. Apparently neither did the man. He left with a snort a moment later.

The next was a woman, gorgeous in every right, but aging. She looked smart, her grip more practiced and steady. She waited a little longer than the last, only letting go with a final squeeze and, “Shame.”

They began to blur together. The process wasn’t invasive so much as simply uncomfortable. Sentinel and guide compatibility worked more like a blood type than anything else. Even with Ben, someone Stan had trusted and bonded with, there wasn’t any connection unless Stan pressed. But Ben had been worth it. These people were simply after a gain.

It was hard to imagine Ben here at all. He had to have sat here before, maybe in this room, gripping Eddie’s hand. Stan imagined he’d have been kind about it. Cautious, excited but ashamed that Eddie had matched to him. Eddie was *suitable for release* yet, so Ben would get to see him more and more, hoping he’d be able to get him out. That he’d move up the list enough to help Eddie run from this hell -

“Hey,” A voice growled. Stan snapped back to himself, head floating somewhere between his hair and the ceiling, still unable to quite

hone in on the angry man across from him. He yanked Stan's hand across the table, bringing it to his own chest, "Focus you little shit,"

"I -"

"*Shut up*, guides don't speak unless spoken to," Stan didn't think he'd appreciate noting that he had, in fact, been spoken to, "It's not listening!" The man called out.

An intercom beeped beside them, "Our vitals show the guide is present and responsive."

"I've been doing this shit for months," The man hissed, "Months! I've helped you track down dozens of these little shits -"

"- Sir, please lower your voice -"

"- You don't get to tell me what to do! Do you know who I am?"

The door opened in lieu of the intercom. Two guards came in, and grabbed the man. The grip on Stan's hand tightened as they hauled him out of the chair. One guard took Stan, pulling him away and against a wall. The other held the yelling man in a headlock. A few moment later the man collapsed.

Rory came stepping in as the man was dragged away. Her hand found Stan's shoulder, giving it what was probably supposed to be a comforting squeeze, "Back down the list, I'm afraid," She sighed, "Such a shame."

"Down the list?" Stan asked, "Not off of it?"

Rory look confused as she stared at him, "Well he's a Sentinel. A senator at that. We can't just abandon him. That would be inhumane."

Stan nearly bit through his tongue.

"Only a few more, promise, we'll find you some luck yet,"

It was the twelfth one where Stan felt a tremble up his arm. A tug in his chest, however involuntary. He'd been closing his eyes, not

wanting to provoke or engage, just waiting it out. But when a small hand found his own he came face to face with a girl. With blue hair. Stan blinked.

She was short, possibly shorter than Beverly if her stature in the chair was any indication. Her - god, it really was blue - *blue* hair was pulled into two small buns, showing shaved sides along her scalp. She wore a dress, but her entire ensemble screaming young and unprofessional. She smiled at him, politely enough, but held a tight sense of nerves that Stan reflected.

The table between them lit up, displaying a monitor along its surface containing Stan's age, height, blood type, and so on. Now things were feeling invasive.

"Wow," She hummed, "You're pretty short,"

"You're the size of a child," Stan muttered before all the blood left his face. What the fuck, Stan?

But the girl laughed. Delighted and high as her eyes crinkled. She extended her free hand in greeting.

"I'm Noelle,"

Stan took her hand, but didn't respond. There was no doubt Rory was watching. But their free hands were the one that bore a brand across freshly peeling skin. Noelle noticed it, brow furrowing, and Stan hid it in his lap.

"So," Noelle began, but stopped short. It didn't seem she had any idea what to do either.

The intercom rang through the room before either could try and guess, "The guide will now initiate contact and attempt to ease you, Noelle. Please press the button switch we gave you if you are uncomfortable. It is now active."

Noelle fiddled with a small disk in her hand, a single button along one flat side.

"Three guesses what'll happen?" She joked, eyes flitting around the

room.

"It's a taser," Stan said, voice flat and small, "You'll send a current through the collar."

"Shit," Noelle dropped the disk to the table, "I mean, unless you're into it,"

She was alarmingly similar to Richie, misplaced jokes and all. Richie would say something even stupider, but hug Stan or squeeze his face until Stan laughed anyway. If Richie could just sit across from him...

"I'm guessing it's not just you who isn't feeling this?" Noelle whispered, leaning across the table, "I mean, I was excited - but, you don't seem -"

"We're prisoners here," Stan chanced, voice barely a whisper.

Noelle blinked. Eyes widening as she processed that. The intercom crackled the same instructions with more force.

"But, I mean, you want to be here, right?" The words fell stilted, unconvincing.

"Do I look like I want to be here? They kidnapped me," Stan rushed, timing his words to the intercom's repeated orders, "They're killing us to be slaves here. You have to help me," Noelle was no longer responding. Instead she stared, disbelief that was setting Stan's teeth on edge, "Find Richie Tozier. He'll tell you, please, I -"

The door swung open, a current bolted through him. Noelle hopped back, shock drawn across her face.

Rory came in, standing between Noelle and Stan, "I'm sorry about that. This one is still in recooperation. Finding them as rogues always makes it more difficult. We'd be happy to reschedule your session for when they're more acclimated."

"Yeah, sure," Noelle mumbled, "Seemed nice enough."

"Nice isn't a key factor in bonding," Rory laughed, "They're not your partner, just your helper. And we at the Center are here to make sure

you get the best experience!”

She walked Noelle out, returning a minute later with a much sterner expression on her face. Stan hobbled to keep her pace as they entered the hall once more. The second door was ajar. Eddie's twitching form was fetal on the ground. A Sentinel shaking, gasping for fresh air as they clawed their throat.

“I’m going to have to tell Robert you were bad, 51186.”

Stan didn’t respond. She shocked him once more.

Patrick, or 16120, shouldn’t be able to intimidate Stan - let alone scare him. Stan had been electrocuted twice today alone. The other boy, despite his leering height, was locked in the same room in the same gray clothes with the same bare feet. Granted, being in a room with him in the dark was not somewhere Stan every wanted to be, but he was *there* . He was locked up just the same. A prisoner in every right.

Patrick wasn’t *scary*. But he was horrible.

“Let me see your arm,” He called, voice floating between their cots. His eyes gleamed, wide open whites staring across at him as Stan’s eyes had slowly adjusted to the blackness.

It was a recurring one sided conversation between them. Patrick, for all his sociopathic tendencies, followed rules. There was a weird balance in him of being as cruel as possible but never being caught doing it. He could have his fun, and didn’t seem scared at all of his circumstances, just as long as he listened to the guidelines.

Sometimes Stan wondered if Patrick even understood what was happening to them both.

“No,” Stan mumbled, eyes trained back at him. Stan had wanted to

roll over, not acknowledge how the other haunted the room. They weren't allowed to get out of their beds, so Patrick - by his own logic - wouldn't ever approach Stan. But putting his back to Patrick seemed like it would lead to more traumatic results. So he kept his eyes locked, staring Patrick down even as the night dragged on. Better to anticipate his next move, be ready for any sudden changes in the tension.

Patrick seemed amused enough with it all, occasionally jerking his head or arm to watch the way Stan twitched - unwilling to tip the scales, rather letting the anticipation hang between them.

"Aw, c'mon," Patrick smiled, a raspy laugh puffing from his lips, "They cooked you, right? Roasted up," He twitched again, Stan's jaw locked, "Lemme see ,"

It had been going on for... well Stan didn't know how long. Exhaustion scratched at the corners of his eyes, heavy lids falling before he forced them to rise with his dipping head. He didn't want to fall asleep first. Patrick was sated for now, but if Stan wasn't awake to jump with nerves who knew what he'd do to amuse himself. He didn't look tired at all and the room allotted no sense of passing time to help Stan. There wasn't even a window. Stan figured they should've gotten one. Then again, he looked back to Patrick, maybe not.

Stan licked his chapped lips, almost too tired to be disturbed by how Patrick followed the movement. Almost. His head dipped again, "Jus..." He yawned, jaw clicking, "Go to sleep,"

"Show me your arm,"

"For god's s-" He huffed, "Patrick, *c'mon* -"

The air seemed to crack between them. Stan alarmingly awake as Patrick swung upright, nearly no noise from the bed as his spine snapped straight. Stan's arm extended between them, a desperate placation, but it was too late now.

"What'd you call me?" He drawled.

"Nothing," Stan whispered furiously, sitting upright himself as Patrick's feet found the floor. Bare soles slapping against smooth tile, "I'm tired, we both are, I didn't - *stop*,"

The words didn't stagger him, even when Stan pressed intention - command - into them, just as they hadn't before. Stan wasn't locked down tonight, a small mercy as he dragged his back flush to the wall. There was nowhere else to go. Maybe he could run for the door, slam himself against it. The guards or nurses had to be alerted when the shock went off, right? He -

Patrick's knee dropped into the mattress, bouncing Stan as much as his own jolt. A hand smacked into the wall beside his head, stray curls caught beneath Patrick's palm. Stan stared back at him. The entire thing felt remarkably similar to when Bill had stared down a neighborhood dog when they were seven. He'd been bit, blood sleucing down his arm as Stan cried and yelled for help. Patrick smiled. His teeth menacing beneath cracked lips.

Stan didn't look away. Better to be bit than roll over.

Patrick wasn't scary.

Stan wouldn't let him be.

"Have a good chat with Robert?" He laughed, "Ol' Bob, that sad sack of shit,"

A few choice words came to mind with Robert, but sad wasn't one of them. Stan shifted, curls tugging as they dragged against the wall, "What does that mean?"

Patrick's brows rose, eyes squinting at Stan's apparent idiocy. But he looked interested, invested in the conversation enough to lower Stan's panic just enough.

"He buys into this. Thinks he's special,"

"I mean that living room set was pretty nice,"

Patrick laughed, a rasp that scraped between them, "It's all a display. False power. We have the real power," Fingers drummed the plaster

beside Stan's ear, "We can do what needs to be done."

"You don't think he's killed people too?"

Stan expected the spark in Patrick's eye; but it didn't make it any less horrible. There was no hiding from those dead eyes. No reason to bother denying what he knew. The lying just upset him - and Patrick was dangerous enough happy.

"Maybe," He hummed, dipping closer like they were having a sleepover. Hiding from their parents. God, "Maybe... but if he did he did it cause they said to. He built power on the *inside*. He wasn't a rogue. It's all gilded with him. None of it's real,"

Stan thought Eddie on the floor, "It seemed real enough,"

"Paper mache," Patrick quipped, "It'll all cave in soon,"

"What does *that* mean?" Stan hissed, "He nearly killed Eddie -"

"Oh, Eddie!" He barked, a fiery delight in his eyes. Hands found his face, fingertips pressed along Stan's temples and cheekbones. Stan's eyes flicked to the door - hoping and dreading a horrible surge of electricity through both of them that could save him, "God, you really made the rounds, huh? Show and tell with - well no *telling* I guess. Eddie doesn't have much to say lately,"

"What happened to him?" Stan tried.

"He's like a little rabbit, right?" Patrick snickered, nails biting against the thin skin around Stan's eyes, "Caught in a snare. Can't call for help," He laughed at his own joke.

Stan jerked under him, trying to dislodge the other man, but Patrick was remarkably heavy.

"Did you know," Patrick continued, ignoring or unaware of Stan's struggles, "That if you squeeze him he can't cry out anymore? It was annoying - how high his voice was... too loud. Too high. It was almost a squeak. He'd cut himself off too fast. Wouldn't let me savor it. Now it's just wheezing. Wheezy Eddie," His eyes came closer to Stan, "How hard do you think I'd have to break him to get that

squeak back?”

“Shut up,” Stan spit, tears welling from the sting against his skin, “Shut the fuck up you piece of shit -”

“- That’s it,” Patrick laughed, voice just as easy as ever, “Get mad. Do something about it.”

“Shut *up* -”

“Gotta try harder,” Patrick laughed, eyelids spasming as Stan tried to ease him. Both were panting, desperate gasps from Stan mixing with Patrick’s amused huffs.

“S-Shut -” The horrible screeching began in his skull once more.

“Kill me. Do it,” The grip became suffocating, but Patrick’s face hardly changed, only his eyes showing the insanity, “How hard to I have to *squeeze* -”

“Fuck *off*!” Stan yelled and slammed his head forward into Patrick. A crack shifted against his forehead. Patrick stumbled off of him, crumbling to a heap on the floor. Stan watched him cup his face, blood seeping between fingers.

Patrick looked up at him. Eyes staring into Stan’s own. Hands left fragmented cartilage to reveal a blood soaked smile. Stan’s spine locked as Patrick began to laugh - a wet chuckle, thick as blood ran down into his mouth.

“You’re just askin’ for trouble,” Patrick said.

“Fuck off,” Stan spit, back still flush to the wall, but no longer crouching away, “I’m not afraid of you.”

“That’s fair,” Patrick hummed, fingers drumming splatters along his upper lip, “I’m not the scariest thing here,”

Thing. Not person.

“Can you stop being cryptic for three seconds?”

“Why ruin the surprise? Eddie’s face was so funny when he woke up
_.”

The door slid open. Maybe it was the exhaustion, or drained adrenaline; but Stan was unconscious before he registered the voltage. Small mercies.

Stan woke up in Robert’s room. A polo was buttoned up around his neck, fabric catching in the links of the collar. His face was free of stubble, hair slightly damp. Stan couldn’t quite decide which bothered him more - so he opted to stare at a pulled edge of velvet lining until something happened. There was no running from the room, best not to make it worse than whatever it was going to be.

The room was dim, only antique bulbs casting a stained glass collage of colors across him. It reminded Stan of The Falcon. The projection room with it’s soft light and dark edges. Of the complete silence, dust floating around him as he was the only thing to shift the air.

But he’d had an out then. A hatch with stairs and a door to Beverly, Mike, Richie, occasionally Ben. God he missed them. He missed them so bad his bones ached, hollowed of their marrow as he sat a freshly washed husk on an armchair.

After awhile he began to count in his head. Softly muttering “one, two, three,” as he tapped his knee, but the timing seemed off. The room felt stale, unfiltered, lifeless. Each tap seemed skewed, a broken metronome. He’d never reach thirty before feeling like he had to start over, like it wasn’t correct.

Beverly wouldn’t stand for this shit. She’d destroy the room, rip out a spring or snap a plank from the chair into a jagged point. She’d fight.

“Eight, nine... one, two,”

Stan imagined telling her about Patrick. About how he kept touching

and prodding him until Stan snapped and presumably snapped his nose. Beverly would be proud of him. Would've said he should've gone for an arm while he was at it. Or at least a hand.

"Twelve, thirteen, fourteen,"

But Stan wasn't brave like her. He hoped she doesn't kick Richie's ass when she finds out what happened. Whatever *did* happen.

RAT

Eddie's scrawled letters imprinted against his eyelids. Pen lined accusations each time he blinked.

"Nineteen, twenty," SENTINEL, "Twenty one, tw-" RAT

"... one, two,"

Richie wouldn't do that. Stan knew Richie wouldn't do that.

Right?

His unending cycle of numerical inconsistency was finally ended by a deep shift in the air behind him. Light poured into the room, coating every scratch and imperfection in the velvet chairs with soft white light. All the scratches were on the arm rests. Stan wondered how many were involuntary.

It could well be chalked up to cowardice, but Stan chose to think of martyrdom as he refused to turn to the footsteps echoed behind him. Two sets. One long, spaced, with heavy purposeful steps. The other light, faster, and off tempo. A limp, maybe. Or someone being dragged.

Robert wasn't a surprise to see, more of an unpleasant expectation. But Eddie staggering behind him set Stan on edge. For himself or Eddie's sake, he wasn't sure.

"Stanny boy," Robert greeted, dropping into the opposite chair, Eddie hovering beside him, "I heard you caused a tussle last night -"

"- I didn -"

“- Not to mention the... *disturbance* you made in front of a poor Sentinel not hours before. And *right after* I told you the rules,” There was an edge to his words, a cracked knife dragging along Stan’s throat as Robert stared, “I stressed the need for rehabilitation in rogues and you just went on and *proved my point*, ” He laughed, high in both register and volume, “I can’t tell if that makes you a troublemaker or a poster child,”

Stan wanted to look to Eddie, to get some idea of what was going to happen. But the paralysis wasn’t anything he was keen to try out again with Robert already looking so angry... or delighted; his expression alarmingly difficult to read.

“Now, despite your attitude and circumstances, the higher ups wanted to get you out for some sessions, compatibility and all that. But you did nothing but spread lies, break rules, the list goes *on*,” Robert’s hand closed around Eddie’s wrist, tugging him closer, “And *on*,”

“What,” Stan swallowed, not letting his eyes meet Eddie’s growing ones, “What do you need me to do?”

“What a sport!” Robert cried, shaking Eddie’s arm. Stan could practically feel the bruise forming from it.

Robert leaned forward, grip still tight on Eddie. His entire aura changing into something softer, more threatening, “See the thing is, buddy, is that you’re on *very* thin ice. You’ve killed a Sentinel, broken a number of your very limited rules, and brutally attacked your roommate. Patrick already wasn’t a looker, and you’ve made him downright tragic with that headbutt of yours,” Eddie almost looked proud, “So you’ve become a candidate. The higher ups want you off the list, but personally, I am all about getting you in line. You’re powerful, Stanley. And the thing about power is that, well, you’re on the wrong side of the fence. You don’t listen very well. And, I gotta tell ya, I’m not buying that little school boy teary eyed *bullshit*. ” The last word was spoken near a growl, not even needing to put a command behind it to make Stan freeze.

“So I need to see you not listen; but obey, buddy. Because we both know you’re too smart for blind allegiance. Your heart isn’t in it. So,

Eddie here," He tugged him to stand between them, "Has pushed a few too many buttons. Just like you. And frankly, I'm not seeing a lot of potential here anymore. See, Eds thinks that his cute lil' face can get him by scot free when he tries to seize a Sentinel's lungs. When he thinks his little pen is allowed to write tattoos across skin, skirt around the rules," Eddie looked livid, unable to defend himself.

"He didn't, I told Rory -"

"If it transferred to your skin, wouldn't it be backwards?" Robert teased, voice light as he crushed Eddie's wrist in his hand, "Y'know, Eddie was a candidate too. Is, technically, still. Little malfunction on this one. Work in progress."

"I don't understand -" Stan tried.

"- Because, once again, you aren't *listening* . Eddie didn't respond to treatment well enough. Three strikes and you're out," Robert turned Eddie to face Stan fully, "Now. Do me a favor..."

kill eddie , stanley .

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm just gonna apologize now.

lemme know what you think and what you think is gonna happen!

15. легкость

Richie's letter had shown up. A neatly printed manila file listing Richard Wentworth Tozier as a shortlist candidate for compatibility screenings and immediate guide placement. Richie had brought it with him to Mike's apartment, shown it to Ben for clarification. He could walk into a Center and cart out a guide in an hour if a match happened.

"It's a plea deal," Ben said, "They know you saw something bad, or might be mixed in something they don't like - but they can't deny your status level. So you get a consolation prize to forgive and forget," Beverly looked excited for a moment before Ben clarified, "They won't give him Stan. He's the thing they're trying to erase."

Mike's apartment was tight, there was nowhere to look to avoid a gaze of either crippling pity or infuriating optimism. The couch barely held the three of them, a worn out easy chair for Mike. It was a two bedroom, but Mike simply dismissed the spare room as, "Roommate," The conversation halted at that, worried about eyes and ears and vans that held kevlar coated men.

"Don't worry about him," Mike had said. And that was enough coming from him to let the plans continue.

"Well Richie could still go there now, right?" Beverly tried.

"It's really strict," Ben explained, "You get in an elevator and carted to a room. You don't see anything they don't want you too. Richie couldn't get anywhere near where he'd need to be,"

"We can't just walk in the front door," Richie said, feet up on an alarmingly wobbly coffee table. The stockpile of books, riddled with bookmarks and sticky notes, had a few blank spots of clear wood for drinks and Richie's heel. It might've been rude to drop a sneaker there but it kept his knee from bouncing with nerves or something deeper. Just nerves, Richie, just nerves. Planning a rescue mission was nerve biting fun.

"How is that less plausible than your *grappling hook*?" Bev asked,

leaning against Ben on the couch. Mike was in the kitchen brewing coffee and making something that stung Richie's nose, but his snort meant Richie was woefully outnumbered.

Mike returned, three mugs in hand, "She's right," He placed them before Bev, Ben and himself. Richie nearly shook more just smelling it, "You and Ben are both Sentinels. Your status is public knowledge now, or at least suspected. Why not? Go... register for one,"

The phrasing left a bad taste in their mouths, but Ben piped up, "I can't get him, they'd know we aren't compatible, I wouldn't see him for more than three seconds. But they know Richie is,"

"They also know I hid an 'enemy of the state' while knowing his status,"

"No," Beverly said waving her hand, "The reports say you helped frame him. It was a way to ensure status before rescue," Richie grimaced, "I know it's shit - and we know that isn't true - but as far as a Center would care - you're a PR dream."

Richie snorted, the bandage across his nose creased, "Bill would disagree, or did I not mention the interrogation in sparkling detail?"

"You said he knew Stan," Beverly offered, "Maybe appeal to that? Get him to help us,"

"His recollections were less than friendly."

"Bill is a traumatized bitch," Mike said easily, drawing a bark of surprised laughter from Ben, "He talks a big game, but he already said he wanted to keep it quiet. If you made a big show of going to get a guide and feeling *drawn into Stan* or something like that..." He shrugged, "Who could deny a Sentinel and guide love story?"

"Love isn't part of it," Ben said quietly, "They just -"

"- Help, I know. But what if you - you just spun the narrative?"

"Into what? I found a guide, got him taken, and go to claim my prize?"

“Well when you put it like that,” Beverly muttered, “It sounds horrible.”

“Because it is, we can’t just -” The oven dinged, “Make pizza bagels - what the hell, Mike - while Stan and what’s his face are in Hell.”

“You can’t go in half cocked,” Mike pressed, “We have one shot at this. And all we have are pizza bagels and your reach in the media. If we do this right then you can help Stan. But you just -”

“- Just *what*?”

“Need to calm down,” Beverly said, “Christ, Richie. Take a breath,”

“I am,” Richie snarked, “Whole lot of ‘em, one after the other, been doing it for years -”

“- Richie,” Ben said, voice soft. Richie stopped, pursed his lips, but took a slow breath nonetheless, “It’s gonna be okay.”

A part of his brain insisted on thanking them. On letting them know they were needed desperately as Richie spiraled into a horrible fit of whatever the fuck was happening to the nerves beneath his skin. But a bigger part just kept getting *angry* and *cruel*. Stan was gone. Stan had been gone for ten days.

“How’s *your* buddy holding up?” Richie asked instead.

Mike stepped between them, a heavy look on his face, “Let’s just meet tomorrow. Falcon office. Usual time.”

Richie looked away from Ben, an ache in his chest from the look on Ben’s face that Richie was sure he mirrored. Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck.

He left.

There were a number of places Richie could go to not be spotted. Most of them had shelves of liquor and awkward fluorescents half on to try and mask the spots and stains along cracked bar counters. It suited him well enough.

The bite from his drink wasn't nearly as soothing as he'd hoped - but then again, maybe punishment was what he deserved. He'd meant to go to The Falcon, ready to hatch some half baked plan to get Stan out of the - the place. The prison. Fuck.

He had nearly been there, feet dragging beneath him, covered face and hair and lack of worth obscuring his identity along busy streets with tunnel visioned pedestrians. The sun had been glaring that morning. Shades were a small mercy as his eyes fought to adjust, reconstruct, *perfect* the world around him. His glasses had been smashed when the raid had happened. The bruise around his eyes was too smarting to try and prop metal frames on anyway - but the hazy handicap was well missed.

It was when the sun became obstructed did Richie finally look up from the cracked sidewalk. The lone pillar that dominated the skyline blocking out the sun. Richie nearly cracked a molar as his jaw clenched. Instead of taking a left at the next intersection to blindly follow the footsteps he'd memorized to a haunted place where a boy used to be - he took a right. And another. And then just stumbled forward until a dingy neon sign beckoned him in.

So he sat there. A booze splashed and dust smeared reflection staring back him. In an appropriately named *Junkyard* violently stomaching well liquor until the dusty air cut through with light once more.

"Are you always this pathetic?" A familiar voice called.

It sounded like something Stan would say. Flat tone to mask worry, dry humor with a bit of bite to it. Richie supposed Stan must've learned it from *someone*.

"The fuck do you want?" Richie muttered, "Following me now? Got some tracker planted in my ass?"

Bill dropped next to him, his stiff arm resting against the bar, "Pretty

sure you'd remember that happening,”

“I thought your whole deal was ‘making p-p-p-people disap-p-peer’, Billy,” Bill didn’t look pleased at the imitation, “Or are you here for a new threatening monologue?”

“I try to keep my threats to a minimum.”

“Well, gee, could’a fuckin’ fooled me,”

“Heard you fucked up your manager well enough. Good on ya, Chase seemed sleazy at best,”

Richie glared at the mirror ahead of them, “Yeah, well, he had a whole ‘betrayal’ thing about him. Why, you interested?”

“Pretty sure I could kick your ass,”

Richie barked a jagged laugh, “How? Popping off that leg and whacking me with it? Like a baseball bat, I bet, you got your choices too - dual wield ‘em.”

“Hilarious,” Bill said, voice flat. God - he sounded like Stan. Richie’s chest ached. His fingers white knuckled the bar edge as a wave of nausea overtook him. Bill just watched over his beer.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Denbrough?”

Bill waved to the bartender, a drink was put in front of Richie, “The rogue 51186 is now considered a Class I Threat,”

Richie stiffened at the name, “What?”

Bill took a sip of his beer, “He’s not willing to take direction or guidance. Acting out, talking back; all cause for further intervention,”

“You can’t just keep rambling and expect me to follow whatever the fuck you’re saying -”

“- I need you to understand that he’s dangerous because I don’t need you being a bigger problem than you already are.”

"Listen -" Richie cut himself off. Bill didn't look worried, or concerned... but he was here. And that had to mean something, "Let me see him. I can - I can *help*, he listens to me,"

Bill's expression softened to a pity that made Richie's blood boil, "He manipulated you. I get it. I do. No one gets it more than me, but that isn't who he is *inside*. He doesn't care about either of us,"

"You can't tell me you knew him and honestly mean that," Richie pressed, "This is - this is *Stanley*."

The brewing fight mercifully dropped off at that. Some chord was left in whatever excuse Bill had for a heart was seemingly struck. At least enough to give pause. Richie and Bill turned to face forward, staring at their respective reflexions. Mike and Ben echoed in Richie's head at the hazy look in Bill's eyes. Get him to trust them. Get him to help. Spin the narrative.

"Bill -"

"Did he ever talk about me?"

The question was nearly non verbal. Hesitant. Bill had to be at least twenty five by the timeline Richie had pieced together; but he slumped more like a nervous teenager. Richie squinted at his pinched face.

"Are you serious?" A tirade was building, but Richie swallowed it down at how Bill tensed, "He... once. Right before the raid. He felt bad about it."

"Oh." Bill took a drink.

"He never hated you - like whatever twisted view you have of him did. He tried to explain it to me."

"... What'd he say?"

"Nothing." Richie said, Bill would probably catch syntax that wasn't Stan's own, "I didn't make him."

Bill's head ticked at that, "You weren't curious?"

“Context clues did enough.” Richie said wryly, “And he looked hurt by it all. Why live in the past?”

Bill snorted, “Some people don’t just get to walk away from that.”

“You have legs now, don’t you?”

Bill finished his drink, long pulls of the beer until just a foam edge remained, “Stan starts screenings today. Eligibility checks.”

Richie’s bolted upright, “What? Where?” He thought of all those strangers, trying to use him, own him, “He can’t - he won’t let them near him -”

“He’s been rehabilitated and will do what’s best for the Sentinels needs,”

“What the fuck does that mean?” But Bill was already dropping cash to the counter, “No, sit the hell down. Let me see him.”

“You’re a lot funnier on TV. “

“I’m serious I... I’m registered for it. I got the letter.” It was burning a hole in his pocket, “And I’m on the list - the fuckin’ shortlist - whatever that is, so just let me see him,”

“Your cooperation in the rescue of 51186 did get you bumped up the list. But we assess pairings based off of compatibility,”

“We are compatible - we,” Held each other on the couch, whispered secrets as we dozed, trusted each other, “- we bonded.”

Bill didn’t like that. Bill didn’t like that at all, “You supplied and encouraged irrational behavior. The compatibility is also about mentality. He’s already got a long list - strong guides like that tend to end up in war zones.”

Richie stopped breathing.

“War zones?”

“Yeah.” Bill scratched along the seam of a scar, “He’s specialized in

reflex responses, emotional leveling, capable in violent situations. He'd be best suited for a squad leader. Maybe a whole platoon,"

The idea of it shook Richie to his core. Stan - stranded in the desert with a squad of meatheads ordering him around. Controlling him. Richie had seen war footage before, in movies and news reels. They tied them up. Left them shackled in a tent to keep them away from weaponry. Threw them defenceless into active war zones, made them act as a pet for a squad of compatible soldiers. He'd die out there. Whether from a bullet or himself.

"He belongs with me," Richie choked.

"That's awfully possessive for someone who preached about kidnappings and rights."

"I treat him like a *person* -" Richie growled, but Bill stood his ground. He had height on Richie, but the bubbling void in him could probably knock Bill's neck into a barstool, "He should be where he wanted to be -"

"- And you think that's with you? C'mon, Richie. Nice, safe house, enough of a one way bond due to memory fragmentation to control you, financial stability? He used you for protection." Bill leaned in, squinting a smirk, "How many times did he push you away?"

"Never off a cliff." Richie sneered.

"You-" Bill visibly collected himself. He turned away, done with whatever shit Richie was going to say next.

The world rocked around them, liquor sloshing his stability as he followed Bill to the door. He swung himself before the exit, unwilling to lose his lead.

"He'll be paired by the end of the day," Bill said, "Long list of people ready to take him home. Keep him in line,"

"I know you're not that fucking stupid," Richie demanded, "He won't -"

"- He'll *have to*," Bill said, voice deadly soft, "Or they'll bring in

someone who has already shown compatibility and capability to handle him.”

Richie blinked, head too foggy to follow, “But you said I couldn’t...”

Bill’s eyes bore into Richie’s own.

“How do you think I knew what he was first?”

“You,” Richie scrambled, fingers clenching the doorframe, “You can’t,”

“I already said,” Bill calmly pried Richie’s grip away, “I’m not gonna let him hurt anyone else.”

“Where the fuck have you been?” Beverly snapped.

Richie stumbled into The Falcon. Disoriented from far more than just the drinks. He had wracked his brain for a plan. But there was nothing. Bill had it all splayed out. Had a claim to him. He’d - he’d be gone by the end of the day.

A second key dangled from the chain around her neck. Stan’s key. Since she was the one taking care of his things. Cleaning out his home. He had a bird, didn’t he? Piper. Richie hadn’t even seen Piper.

“With Bill,” He hiccuped.

Bev leaned close, nose scrunching as Richie tried to hold his breath, “And how much booze is involved in that?”

“Christ, Bevvie, what’re you? My mom?”

Mike leaned against the counter, a deep draw in his brow, “If you aren’t going to take this seriously,”

“I am!” Richie insisted, stepping closer to him,

"Then help us," Mike said, "You can't just -"

"- Just what?" Richie chuckled, hysteric smile aching across his teeth, "What the fuck can we even *do* ? Ask nicely? Hey, Mikey, maybe you could just offer a fucking voucher, huh? 'One free movie per guide purchased! I'll even toss in a ginger for kicks! She hides fugitives!'"

Beverly stepped between them, fury in her eyes, "Richie,"

"No, Bev, no - what the *fuck* are a couple of - of *movie theatre employees* gonna do? Huh? Cause last I checked, Stan is *gone* and *none of us* have any way to get him back! Unless you've got some fucking scheme locked up in your head that doesn't end with them just killing him off for all the trouble he's causing -" *Class I Threat* - The ache in his chest hammering into a panic - a desperation, "So what the fuck can we do?!"

The silence hung between them. The empty lobby thick with boiled over rage and stupor. Beverly might've punched him again a moment ago, She probably should've - but now she just looked... stunned. A vacancy in her eyes that Richie couldn't bring himself to feel bad about. He couldn't bring himself to be anything. A hollowed out cavity within him that had been screamed away - replaced with despondence in lieu of catharsis. Bile rose in Richie's throat.

"That's right," He chuckled, "Not a goddamn thing."

He turned to leave. The shattered door of Betty Ripsom was still coated in posters, peeling at the edges. The only memorial to a blurry face on the news. Stan had been in that footage. Standing dumb in the doorway, terrified. Richie wanted to destroy it, obliterate it from his memory - of how Stan would stare at it with frayed nerves - of how it was all the signs he couldn't see before it was too late. Before his time was limited to hours, minutes, before Stan was dragged away while he stood there and watched.

His arms felt too heavy after fraying a single corner. He walked back out into the sunlight.

"Hey," A wobbling Beverly called at his back, "*Hey!*" Her voice was bellowing.

Richie stopped. He didn't turn, "He's already gone,"

"You're an asshole. A fucking asshole - you're not even *trying* to get him back. You know what I think?"

"... What, Bev?"

"Stan thinks you sold him out," Richie's spine locked up, whipping around to protest, "Why wouldn't he? We trusted you to help him, to keep - and what? He's gone."

"I didn't," Richie begged, voice empty, "I told you. You said -"

"- He doesn't know that, Richie. He's alone in there and they're doing god knows what to him and you aren't helping!" Her voice rose to a shriek, Richie's eyes darted around, expecting a van to fly up to the corner and drag Beverly away too, "He cared about you - he was a fucking dork for you. Just -" She yanked the chain from her neck. Cursing as she tried to unhook the clasp with nails bitten to the quick, "Here. Take it. It's going to be gone soon so grab whatever you need."

Richie walked up slowly and took the key. She shoved a crumpled paper at him next, worn down from nervous folding and unfolding. The seams were worn. Beverly stared up at him, a simmering anger still there.

"Whatever the fuck that stupid shit said to you - you can't just cave. We need you. Stan needs you. And if you can't get your shit straight then you don't deserve what he risked for you."

"Do you want to punch me?" Richie asked softly.

Her jaw ticked, but instead a sadness took her eyes, "Stan wouldn't want that."

Despite her declaration, they only talked about him in past tense.

Bevvie should've punched him. The hollow weight didn't let up, even once Richie found himself stumbling up a cracked stoop. The door was sloppily painted. Inconsistent coats of eggshell white sitting thick against the cracked seams of grain.

The buzzer was shrill as Richie punched in the code on the scrap of paper. Uneven steps that carried a dangerous range of height and depth inconsistencies creaked as Richie climbed higher and higher. He wasn't going to chance that elevator.

He stood in front of the door for a long while. An eviction notice would be slapped on it soon. Beverly couldn't afford whatever rent this was on top of her own. Plus, if they got word of the reason for Stan's absence he'd lose it no matter what. A guide had no claim to property.

Unwilling or unable to open it; Richie couldn't decide. The wood was chipped, curved edges from not quite fitting the door frame, dragging against the floor that carried a swept arc of missing varnish.

The sharp click of the lock echoed down the hall. The door scraped against the floor. Richie flipped on the light.

The room was beyond sparse. No photos, no knickknacks, nothing. Just a foldable cot, a microwave, mini fridge, outdated television. And a bird cage.

Piper was curled in the far corner of her cage. She looked nothing and exactly like Stan had described. Soft, sweet, incredibly small - but hostile. All her feathers were puffed up, head flicking as she cooed at him.

"Hey," Richie tried, throat tight. She didn't move when he opened the gate. She lunged to nip him when he reached his hand in.

Stan had said she didn't fly. Was too nervous or traumatized from something else that had happened before he'd found her. Richie's knees wobbled, and he let himself fold to the floor beneath him until he dropped to the hardwood beside her. His eyes were level to her

now, pooling in tears as she cooed and flitted at him.

Richie startled when she jumped - flinging herself and flapping her wings senselessly in a pattern forgotten as she plummeted to the ground. A suffocating lump lodged in his throat as her talons pattered across the floor. She came to a stop, hooping and cooing at the door. The door with three locks.

"I'm sorry," He choked, a bubbled sob lodged in his throat as Piper called, "I'm so sorry, he's..."

It didn't feel right to put her back in there. Richie crawled across the floor and held out his hand. She nipped at it cruelly. He didn't stop her. Only once two fingers were bleeding did she seem to pause.

She called again. Richie apologized. She hopped up onto his hand.

Piper didn't weigh a goddamn thing, and Richie was half worried he'd dropped her as he stood back up. But she tucked herself against the collar of his jacket, mindlessly tugging at any strands of hair that brushed against her.

Richie looked around the room again, trying to bite back hiccuped sobs still coming out of him like a child. There was nothing. No indication that Stan had lived here for *years*. Piper was living in a ghost house. Waiting for Stan. Richie grabbed the cage and a bag of birdseed from atop the counter.

When he turned with the bag, a hand absently checking the flightless bird hadn't bailed, Richie paused. The mini fridge held a single magnet, holding up a crease worn lottery ticket. Stan didn't seem the type to gamble - let alone hang onto a bet from... Richie's brows rose, Christ, six years.

It was folded oddly. The crease lines uneven. Cutting across numbers diagonally instead of meeting at the corners for a neat fold. It was worn in from repetition. Deliberate. Stan was meticulous in everything Richie had seen. He'd even caught him pressing a straw sleeve into a perfect little square. He'd gone pink when Richie'd laughed about it, and then laughed when Richie squawked at the impressive projectile it'd made.

But the ticket didn't sit right. Didn't fit the room. Richie gently tugged it from the magnet. He refolded it along crooked creases and slipped it into the birdseed bag.

He left the rest to dust.

Richie made his way back down the stairs with Piper, stroking her feathers as she nipped his hand regardless. Stan wouldn't want her to be alone.

The uber ride back to his house with a dove on his shoulder and face obscured was, hopefully, not the weirdest the driver had dealt with today. At least they didn't sneak a photo, so any claim online wouldn't be backed with evidence. Cities had their perks after all.

The house was cleaner than it'd ever been. Almost hospital like - rife with sanitation. Aside from the new door, not a piece was out of place. Piper hopped down once Richie slumped into the couch, a sea of tufted upholstery that felt too wide. Too roomy.

He'd been holed up in a hotel for a few days - police were all over the 'rescue location' that was his living room. But returning didn't feel any better even with a guest. Soft cotton and julep wafted in the air. Subtle yet undeniably present, soaked into every surface. Stan had smelled like citrus. Like aged paper with invisible ink. Stan would've informed Richie how stupid that sounded. But he couldn't. The presence of Stan was cut away. Extracted.

At least Piper made a good roomie. She shit wherever she felt like, but didn't run up the electric bill. Richie bounced her on his finger to beats he'd make up, watching her bob and sway with little trills. She seemed to like it, knew the motion. Stan must've done something similar. Richie could picture it, little bobs to obscure old music that no one but Stan liked.

"You're experiencing bond drop," Bill offered, "It's why you look like

shit,”

Richie looked up after letting Piper hop onto the coffee table. Bill looked almost like a scarecrow standing in his doorway. Standing on poles. Heh. Richie didn't think he'd appreciate the sentiment, “You look like a scarecrow,”

“It might also be why you act like shit. But that seems preexisting,”

Stan wasn't standing behind him. Wasn't clinging to his coat or trying to run from him. Richie tried to let that feel like a good sign. That Stan was still somewhere they could reach. But he ached to see him wandering into his house again. Pretending he wasn't staring at the neighbor's kids with a soft awe.

Richie scrubbed his eyes, ignoring his smarting bruises.

“I thought my physique was to blame on my sexy baton smashing fetish,”

“Well that certainly doesn't help either,” Bill laughed. He was horribly disarming. But not as charming beyond Richie seeing through his bullshit. He seemed uncomfortable, jumpy, worried, “He lured you in, got you attached. The severing of a bond can be dangerous, especially... romantic ones,”

“You sound like a prude,” Richie noted, “Grown up relationships get stunted from that fall too?”

Bill crossed the threshold, ignoring the comment, “Did you know guides can even bond to each other? Don't know what good that does. Seems like a waste. Just,” He swallowed, “Senseless,”

He left the door ajar. A cool breeze floating through the foyer. Piper couldn't tottle fast enough to make a break for it, but Richie shifted closer in case of a sudden bravery in flight.

“Well you're certainly the expert,” He let his head loll back, “Don't you have a lair to go to? Anywhere that isn't my house? Or wherever I am? You're really making me rethink that tracker denial,”

Bill ignored him, “I had the same problem,” He didn't bother to

clarify who, Richie could guess, “Went into an induced coma for nearly six months, then... recovery.” Bill’s throat clicked. Richie sat up.

“Deprivation tank?”

“Yep.” The tanks were hell. Floating in unending nothingness with no sense of time until they deemed you well enough to function. Coming out of a coma right as his capabilities were awakening? Bill must’ve been locked in one for just as long, “511 -”

“- Stop pretending he doesn’t have a name.”

“... *Stan*,” Bill relented, “Was gone when I was released. They said his family was too torn up about it, that Stan was too shaken by the loss,” He chuckled, “If his parents weren’t Leveled I’d guess he convinced him through other means,”

“You really know how to flesh out a villain in a scared twelve year old. Did he cackle when you fell or was that all part of the delusional ambiance?”

“He ruined my life. He’s ended other’s,”

“You’re a broken record,” Richie muttered, “Did you come here to give the same speech or do you have anything to share?”

Bill’s jaw worked, but he didn’t comment. Either sick of or growing immune to Richie’s jabs; who could say? Instead he scuffed his shoes against the edge of the rug. Piper cooed at him, head ticking as she assessed whatever threat he could be. Richie leaned up, ready to take him to the floor if he made a move on a dove. Richie didn’t think he would but... Bill, so far, wasn’t one for predictability.

“What’s its name?” He asked.

“Piper,” Richie said, “She’s Stan’s,”

Bill ghosted a smile at that, a nostalgia he didn’t deserve coating across scar torn skin.

“He always liked birds. Had a whole book of them; was insistent

Georgie's first word should be *phoenix* ,” He laughed, “It ended up being *shit* , but Stan said that just as much. Potty-mouth-Uris,”

It was disarming to watch, the way Bill looked at Piper. Any sense of special agent predator sluicing off of him and leaving a stranger in its wake. Stan had been his friend - his best friend. Richie didn't move, letting the new information settle around them.

“Who's Georgie?” He asked, keeping his voice blank - unsuspecting.

Bill blinked, seeming to come out of wherever he went, “My b-brother.”

“Does he have some dark history with Stan too?”

Bill snorted at that, “He was barely a year old when i-it happened. He doesn't remember Stan, just the aftershocks of him. He just gr-r-graduated college. Smart kid.”

Richie couldn't help himself, “Smart enough to know what you really do for a living?”

He expected retribution, maybe a sarcastic comeback, or even a laugh. But something somber settled on Bill. Poker face fading as stuttered wedged into his speech. He visibly collected himself, just as he'd done in the interrogation room, but not fast enough for Richie to miss it.

“He's figuring it out.”

Richie stared at Bill. Bill stared at Piper, “What're you doing here, Denbrough?”

“I'm keeping an eye on you,”

“Yeah. You did that two days ago,” Richie stood up, legs wobbling despite himself, “Want to try that again?”

Bill took a deep breath. Then another. Another. Each exhale setting Richie's nerves on edge.

“If you could get him out,” Richie began, “If you could claim him,

would you? To get him out?”

Bill didn't respond.

“It's Stanley,” Richie tried, begging laced through his tone.

“Georgie is missing.”

Richie blinked, not following whatever kind of jump Bill just made,
“What -”

“He's a guide. A ro - I told him to turn himself in. Surrender himself to the program. He'd kept me in the dark for years, didn't really recognize it himself. He plateaued early; nightmares of becoming like Stan,”

“I'm sure you had nothing to do with that,” Richie snarked.

“But I said he'd b-be okay,” Bill said, “If he went and just told them. That they'd help him. I - I haven't seen him in two days, he went off the grid,”

“I take back what I said before,” Richie said, “You're the dumbest fucker I've ever met. What - how could you even think that would be a good idea? Did you think you could *protect* him?” Bill flinched, that was the nerve, Richie dug in, “You work for them. You are an active participant in this bullshit. You led him to the slaughter and you -” Richie laughed, booming into street, “You're fucking paying for it. Just like the rest of us.”

“Georgie isn't -”

“- He's a guide, apparently. A scared rogue. Hiding from you. Does that sound familiar?”

“Stan is up for an experimental procedure,” Bill blurted, “Last attempt at compliance.”

There was no noise beyond the ringing in Richie's ears.

“What...” Richie swallowed, trying again, “What does that mean?”

"I don't know," Bill said, "It was just tacked to his file. No explanation on what it means. Just - extensive method."

"For rogue compliance," Richie corrected, "And if they'll do it to him,"

"I won't let that h-happen to G-G-Georgie,"

"C'mon, Bill. You can't tell me you think you have a say in that anymore."

Something in Bill seemed to crumble.

"If I go in for a screening," Richie said, voice low, even with all the bugs ripped from his house, "Can you point me in the right direction?"

"They'd s-stop you,"

"Then tell me how they'd try."

A knock startled both of them, turning to the doorway where a very uncomfortable girl stood. She shrunk back at the wild look in Richie's eyes.

"Hi," She began, her blue hair fell over her eyes as her head dipped, not sure where to look, "Uh, you're Richie Tozier, right?"

Notes for the Chapter:

c'mon, richie. you're running out of time.

hdsofsdhfiodhf thank you for reading this far, sticking out the mini hiatuses as life happens. i really appreciate it.

please leave a comment, lemme know what you think, any predictions, and if it sucked.

16. sahal

“Did you know guides can bond?” Stan asked Eddie, voice hushed. They lay side by side on the latter’s cot, shoulders brushing as their chests rose in time. Their eyes watched the door, waiting for the next nightmare. Stan was four days into this... whatever this was. A dream, he liked to think. Maybe he’d wake up at the end and it was all a wild nightmare he’d come up with for years. He didn’t imagine himself being so lucky.

Monotony was a curse in itself - an expectancy trying to settle in their bones that neither could afford. Stan looked away only once Eddie finished dragging pen across page, trading shifts of their lighthouse to read.

THAT’S PRETTY GAY OF YOU,

He ended phrases with commas lately. Would tap the page twice beside it. He couldn’t say; but Stan liked to think it meant *Stanley* like he would say his name in his own language. Stan would try to whisper Eddie’s own as much as he could. A sanctuary of identity between them. A humanity.

Stan pinched Eddie’s waist and got an unclicked pen jab in retribution. Stan snorted and Eddie let out that breathy wheeze that he could manage.

“They can,” He laughed, “We can - well, not *we we*, cause y’know,” Stan shrugged, “You’re the worst.”

WEEWEE

“For god’s sake,” Stan groaned, “What are they even gonna think of that?”

YOU HAVE A PISS KINK

“Now you’re just being a dick.”

Eddie grinned, it was a smarting one. He had a face like he was going to cause trouble. No wonder Ben liked him so much. Stan didn’t let

himself go there, instead grabbing the pen to scratch out 'YOU' to scribble 'I' above it. Eddie whacked him with the book, but didn't correct it further.

A cry echoed down the hall. Both boys shot up, tense, ready. It was a young voice. A child. There were a few, but not nearly as many as Stan had worried about. He used to hope it just meant less guides, but Eddie has explained only rogues were locked in their halls. Children tended to show up voluntarily. An offering.

A girl, hardly a teen, was dragged past the door. A collar was around her, but she were so small the orderly didn't seem to bother with a shock. He tugged her along, and for all her struggling she practically floated beside him. Like a child tugging a balloon against a light breeze.

They were more lenient with kids. Something Stan felt sick being happy about. The Center usually blamed rogues that young on parents. It probably had been. Her parents were in jail then. If she had any other siblings they'd be in custody too, monitoring for any guide behavior.

It... at least they weren't electrocuting her. At least they let her cry.

"We made it awhile," Stan said in the heavy silence that followed, "We weren't so... we made it out there. At least for awhile,"

LIVES

Eddie face was blank, poised. But Stan got it. Stan had come to understand what Eddie couldn't say - fill in the gaps with intention. They weren't children, but they were ripped from the illusion of freedom. They both had been.

"How old were you?" Stan asked. He realized that he didn't know how old Eddie was *now* . A deceitful blend of trauma and round cheeks left him a mystery.

SEVENTEEN

That was young. Stan looked back to the door as a wail rang through the air. It was cut short with a scream. Guess the orderly got tired of

it after all.

“Who was it?” The question felt like sand on his tongue.

Eddie looked at his notepad for a long while. He seemed to think on it, like he wasn't sure, like there could've been a few answers. The longer it took the worse Stan felt for it. But, after a pregnant pause, Eddie wrote.

MOM

“Did she turn you in?” Stan asked. Eddie shook his head. Stan's brow furrowed, “Did she know?” A nod, “Did... did she hide you?” A nod.

That didn't add up.

“But it was her fault?” Another nod. Eddie's nose wrinkled, a shine coating his eyes that gave Stan pause. He didn't ask anything else. Instead letting himself drop back against the sheets. Eddie didn't follow, but Stan didn't press it.

Instead he watched the way Eddie's shoulders shook. The way he went somewhere Stan didn't understand but could relate to completely. Eddie loved his mom, probably still did. But it was her fault.

“Eddie,” He mumbled. The boy stilled, head leaning to the doorway. But Stan repeated it. A mantra. Eddie seemed like he needed to hear his own name. Sometimes he would whisper, “Stanley Thomas Uris,” To himself once Patrick would fall asleep. But Eddie couldn't do that. So Stan could risk a shock. He'd do it for him.

“I wouldn't hurt you,” Stan said, “They - I won't.”

He *couldn't*.

Eddie dropped back against the bed. He didn't look at Stan. But instead wrote,

STOP HITTING ON ME

Stan laughed, “I'm serious,” He swore, “Stick with me, kid.” He said

it with a deep voice, grovelly and uneven.

Eddie smiled crookedly. He tapped the page twice. But he didn't look at him. Eddie didn't believe him. But that was okay. Stan flicked his nose. Eddie kicked his shin.

It was okay.

Stan was on top of Eddie before either of them could blink. Shaking palms crushed down into a wheezing windpipe. The smooth suggestion seeped into Stan's bloodstream, *kill eddie*, over and over - unintelligible but irrefutable just the same. The message carried savagery, that anything less than with his own two hands would be unacceptable. It bellowed in him. Carving him out and replacing his nerves with marionette strings.

Eddie was turning blue beneath him, gasping silently, clawing at Stan's arms until he drew blood. Rivulets fell to pool between his clenched fingers.

Robert loomed above it all, providing a macabre parody of comfort to the forced performers in his assaults. He crouched beside them and stroked along Eddie's hairline until the boy's clawing grip faltered. His arms fell, smacking to the ground beside his head. The even his panicked chest stopped heaving, throat stopped fluttering beneath Stan's blood slicked palms.

Robert had shushed Stan when he had begged for salvation that wouldn't come. Eddie couldn't even beg.

Eddie didn't even look betrayed, but resigned - terrified, but resigned all the same. Fighting only on reflex until Robert eased survival out of him. It was horrible. And Stan couldn't even look away.

Stan was floating, not connected to the limbs that moved of Robert's volition. Stan tried to fight it, tried to apologize; *anything* to let Eddie

breathe again. But not even his face could twitch, a blank stare betrayed only by tears dripping down his nose and onto Eddie's purpling cheeks.

"That's it," Robert said, palm stroking along Stan's back, "That's it..."

No, Stan begged, nonono no

But it was a lost cause. Robert was a force unto himself. Eddie was - Eddie - *fuck* . Stan's chest was ripping open, spilling across the floor around his victim. A cold agony was seeping between his ribs, horrible, undeniable, *cruel* as he stared down at Eddie. Stan was losing air himself, from the ache. The reverberating gouge that tore at him.

Please god Eddie stop help stop me god

Eddie blinked. Lips parted for a moment before going slack once more. Hands trembled beside his head, twitching with imperceptible jolts until they began to move once more.

Robert's eyes were only on Stan, into his blank mask of expression. He wasn't watching Eddie anymore. The boy was as good as dead.

But Eddie's arms rose, hands skidding across Stan's skin. Unable to hold them up himself. The caked blood flecked off on the hairs of Stan's arm until he held Stan's face. Stan desperately hoped he'd punch him hard enough to knock him out - though the idea alone was impossible - Stan couldn't follow the order if he wasn't awake. But instead of a fist or grip - Eddie cradled. The touch was Beverly holding him in The Falcon's office, Richie in the hospital closet - it was *home*.

Stan's grip faltered. It hardly made a difference - Eddie's eyes were rolling back - but Robert's hand on Stan's back slammed down against vertebrae. Shoving the boy further down and into Eddie's hold.

kill eddie , stanley . now .

L e t g o

The second voice was frail. Higher in pitch, stumbling across clarity. A half garbled whisper. It held no candle to the roaring fire that was Robert's decree. It hardly registered.

But it, despite it all, rang through Stan like a bell. It was sharp, angry, and pinched in desperation.

Eddie's voice.

Stan let go. Hands prying themselves free of Eddie's throat.

An angry hiss spit from behind him as Eddie heaved a ragged gasp of air, but Stan's feet skid underneath himself until he could throw his body backwards. The velvet armchair tipped as both Robert and Stan slammed into it, wood squealing as it ricocheted against cement.

"You little fucking *brat* - " Robert growled beneath him. An arm came around Stan's throat, attempting to kill or ease him - Stan wasn't sure. But he wouldn't give him the opportunity. Stan swung an elbow back as Robert's arms came up to grab him. A snap and howl answered him.

Eddie was still on the floor, gasping and heaving as he shook. But he was alive. And that was going to have to be good enough for now. Stan popped his elbow back once more and the angered roar stopped. He fumbled Robert's wristband loose before scrambling off of the prone man. Stan's knees buckled beneath him as he wobbled to Eddie. The bruises were already forming around the boy's throat. Stan didn't have time to feel bad, neither of them did.

Stan reached out for him, a wave of staggering relief hitting him as Eddie gripped him back. He hauled Eddie to his feet, letting the smaller boy lean against him before gasping, "We need to run."

A bond was a tricky thing.

Older studies deemed later either inconsequential or simply unconstitutional described the vast landscape of possibilities. Old Hollywood would paint the picture perfect love birds of a Sentinel and a guide; but a bond could be anything. A guide to a guide even. Some argued Sentinels could bond exclusively as well, but there were few good results to that. Too volatile. Hostile even. It was an act of trust, of mutual respect, of unity between two individuals who saw each other on equal ground.

Those books were all burned.

A guide can bond to a Sentinel on nearly any level; whether that entail romantic, platonic, familial. It was all completely up to circumstance. Siblings were a common example, back when textbooks still allowed talk of guides staying with their families.

But after the Trouble came the need to cultivate and assign partnerships. Romance was tossed aside for practicality and friendship wasn't considered viable. The concept of a bond became near a slur. It was a pairing now. A contract between a Sentinel and their guide.

But bonds happened outside of a person's own knowing consent. It was deeper, instinctual, and existed in a spectrum. Legal documents couldn't control how a connection was made.

So what better way to bond a guide than make them unaware it was happening at all.

The concept of a 'trauma bond' came to fruition after guides decided they didn't want to be told who to be with; that they wanted to return to the old ways. The golden days. Stan always resented the idea; they were, after all, children of a gilded perspective now.

There were examples of stockholm syndrome in the cases of bonds. The idea was horrible, gruesome, and abhorrent. But. Desperate times. Towers were constructed to study and adapt a cruelty into a procedure.

The first few subjects were lambs to the slaughter - one in a literal sense. But a formula of trauma versus nurture was smoothed out

enough for practical use. A guide would be put under duress and a Sentinel would be provided as the only sense of relief. Conditioned until no other variable existed in the guide's mind. The methods themselves could vary, but the result was always the same. A guide would be too scared to leave the bond at all.

But trauma was a spectrum in itself. And who better to bond to than someone walking through hell side by side?

“Get up, Eddie,” Stan begged, adrenaline the only thing carrying the two through the blank corridors. Eddie had tipped rounding a corner and didn't seem able to right himself. His corneas were pools of blood. Burst vessels speckled around vacant brown eyes.

He better not be fucking dead. Not after that.

But it didn't matter - Robert would kill them both anyway. There had to be some level of strike system, Eddie had clearly become expendable. What's one more to the gallows?

Stan didn't know where they were going. No windows. No signs. No sense of anything beyond endless doors.

But a ding sounded to his right. None of the doors ever did that only - there was only a hallway barrier to the right. Stan propelled them both towards it, a soft gasp at the pace the only thing letting him know Eddie was still breathing at all.

“We're almost there,” Stan promised, “Just a little -“

s t o P

Stan nearly toppled them both over as his feet skidded across marble. Eddie, albeit weakly, pushed Stan towards the wall. The wall cut in, a corner created against endless expanses of gray to accommodate the design of the barrier. Stan didn't argue, didn't demand an answer and

hugged them both flush to the notch in design. Eddie twirled a finger into three tight circles, staring at Stan. A moment later two scrub wearing men exited the door beside them.

Rounds.

They walked past, inches from the two boys. Unseeing by the barest blind spot and mechanical reflex to not look for two escapees.

Neither Stan nor Eddie moved until the two had passed the way that the boys had come. Only then did Stan whisper a soft, “Not telepathy my ass,”

Eddie smacked him. The arm continued around Stan’s shoulders what could only be a hug. A fullness swelled in Stan’s chest, not unlike when he’d helped Richie for the first time. Stan held him too. There were no alarms. No sirens. Robert was out of commission and the hell of that room couldn’t have been anything less than confidential.

Stan pulled back enough to look at Eddie’s haunted face, pinkening up once more as oxygen reentered his bloodstream. He’d almost lost him. He’d almost taken him out *himself*. But he was alive. They were both alive.

Stan pulled them off the wall at Eddie’s nod and put the wristband to a wall censor imbedded beside the barrier. They watched the barrier part.

“C’m on,” Stan urged, arm tight around Eddie’s waist. Eddie gripped his shirt, and the two took off once more.

The hallway barrier only protected maybe ten yards of space. The two boys both dropped to a crouch as slate doors made way to glass enclosed offices. The one directly to their right had a gold painted plaque beside the door. It was the only office without blinds.

Robert Gray

Stan went to use the wristband, but the door didn’t even have a sensor. He pressed lightly and the door swung open. It didn’t even have a handle. The space was disturbing. Similar furniture to the training room scrambled against sleek workplace architecture. The

room had more knick knacks than any office had a right to. Covered in articles that were faded from sunlight and -

Sunlight.

Stan, for a moment - the longest moment, forgot where he was. Forgot what he was doing. Forgot everything.

The sun was setting across the skyline, cascading oranges and pinks a watercolor across the cloudless sky. It warmed Stan, coated him in its glow. It was the greatest thing he'd ever seen. A sob was trying to bubble out of him, or a scream, maybe even a laugh. He couldn't tell. It didn't matter. Because that was the sky.

Eddie shoved past him, shaking Stan back into awareness, back into the moment. And the moment was not a fucking great one. Not yet. They needed to get out. Get away. Get - get to that sky.

They were still in a box. But they wouldn't be for much longer. Not much longer.

Stan pivoted to rush the elevator, smack Robert's wristband until it dinged and brought them to salvation. But Eddie grabbed him, yanked him back. He tapped Stan's throat, a soft cling of nail against metal. The collar. They couldn't walk out, not looking how they did. They were blood splattered, Stan's arms had barely stopped bleeding, and Eddie's throat was a collar of mottled bruises. Their clothes alone wouldn't get them out. They didn't know where the elevator even went.

"Clothes," Stan mumbled, rifling through the office, "Clothes, we need - keys!" Eddie looked up at him, alarmed at the volume, "He's gotta have a car, right? We can, as long as we can get to a car. They have an underground garage. I've seen the entrance from the street. We -"

Eddie was already moving, Stan followed suit. They found shoes, too big for either of them but two pairs nonetheless, a sweater for Stan and a jacket for Eddie. Stan even found a scarf, and they both decided Stan's glaring black collar was more noticeable than Eddie's bruises. Eddie tugged the collar up high, and buttoned it as far as it

could go.

“Do you see any keys?” Stan asked. Eddie shook his head. They’d upended the desk and cabinets looking but were only met with more clothes and shoes. Robert probably carried them on his person and any longer in this room would be a risk. Who knew how long the offices would remain uninhabited. Stan reached for Eddie, and the two ran for the door.

The smile across Stan’s face was splitting, unfamiliar after everything. They were getting out. They were getting *out* . He pressed the wristband to the monitor. It beeped.

They waited.

Nothing happened.

Stan tried again, holding it as it slowly beeped over and over. Eddie took the band, nearly crushing the screen as he jammed it against the sensor. He looked over the band and froze.

The screen was red with a single message blinking.

UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS

Stan grabbed it, “No, it...” It had worked for the doors though, it had worked for... Stan looked back at the office. The open displayed office with no privacy or locks on the door. The office with no keys and full of clothes.

Robert couldn’t leave.

A garbled shriek rang out to Stan’s left. He turned just as Eddie collapsed to the floor. His body shook, but instead of the moment of agony into aftershocks... he kept seizing. Stan looked up to Robert holding a rag to his face with the two men from the hallway. One was holding down on his wristband. The other simply watched, almost impressed at the two guides who al - who... almost made it. Stan tried futilely to open the door. But the beep rang out between them once more. Eddie still jerked against the floor.

“Stop,” Stan begged, “Stop -”

“- Drop the wristband, 51186,” One of the men called.

Stan moved to, looking helplessly at the screen, it didn't even work.
Not when it counted

... a third number blinked across the screen.

39224

Stan pressed the number. Robert jerked. Startled. Nearly fell before finding his feet. His head dropped, knock kneed as he slumped. As his head rose, so slowly... Stanley had never seen a rage like that before. The other orderly scrambled to his own wristband but Stan was sure the icy fear coursing through him made him lose his grip on the watch more than any shock could.

Robert didn't walk quickly towards them, no faster than he'd ever done before. But he looked unhinged. Dangerous beyond what Stan thought was possible. He reached for Eddie, to shield him, block him from the repercussions their last stand.

But a hand closed around his throat. Pinching metal into skin as he collapsed back against the elevator door that wouldn't open for any of the three of them.

“You -”

“*Quiet!*” Robert roared, nearly shaking the glass walls as he stepped further in until Stan's heaving chest brushed his with every gasped breath, “Take a page out of your buddy's book and be *quiet*.”

His posture shifted, and Stan strained his eyes to watch as one patent leather shoe found Eddie's wrist. He slowly pressed down, weight adjusted until Eddie gasped anew, unable to yank himself free. Stan couldn't tell if the electricity had stopped. He prayed it did.

“See,” Robert growled, breathing ragged as he pinned Stan, “I thought you could listen - just *once* - to what you're told. But Eddie,” The boy pulled against the snare on wrist at his name, “Got in your head. *Bonded to you*. Disgusting. And as much as he's a pain in my ass,” A croaked *shriek* whistled out as a nauseating crack echoed through the room, “Another door opens. You're going to be my big

project, kiddo. You're my ticket out of here. And if that means you need a whipping boy then *so be it.*"

"You're never getting out of here," Stan spit through the tears cutting down his cheeks, "You're going to rot in here just like the people you brainwash. You're their pris -"

The punch wasn't unexpected, but it socked Stan right between the eyes. A crunch echoed in his skull as his head whipped back into the elevator door behind him. His head dropped, blood dribbling between his bare feet and Robert's pristine shoes. Eddie's wrist was bent the wrong way. Stan spit. A glob of blood landed against the brogues. Not pristine anymore.

"Get off of him," Stan gasped.

"Oh, Stanley, he should be the last thing you're worried about right now."

The two men moved forward. One dragged Eddie away by his shirt as a needle found Stan's throat. A hot sting trickling through his skin as his eyelids tipped shut.

The next moment felt hazy. Unnatural. A heat in that turned his muscles to a soft stone. Sinking him deeper into the table beneath him. Stan tried to blink. But each allowance of lashes to fall left it harder to open them again. Once his eyes cracked enough to focus, his own blurry reflection stared back. Inches from his own face.

An oxygen mask was covering his mouth and nose, fogging as he breathed slow. He tried to dislodge it, turn it away. But a heavy ring of cushion sat snug around his face. He felt too heavy to do more than nudge his face lightly.

"Patient is coming to," Someone called, a foggy sound somewhere above him.

“Wait a little longer,” Another answered, “Just finished strapping him down. We don’t want to mix the sedative with the anesthesia.”

Stan felt his legs and arms moving, strapped down against more padding. He felt prone. His hands came to rest by his head as his legs were stretched out together. His back was exposed, a cut out sheet over him as cold air drifted across his skin.

“Administer anesthesia,” The second voice called. A confirmation came as a cold rush came through his veins. He could taste the initial saline before a heat followed. His limbs began to feel heavy once more.

“Prepare for incision.”

What.

A click echoed through the room.

His eyes shut before he could coerce another thought. He only meant to blink. To try and pay attention. But he met darkness instead.

Through all the terror, all the rage - *fear* - he should be feeling. Stan could only float above it. He’d never felt lighter.

A heavy cotton coated Stan’s tongue, sticking to the roof of his mouth as he tried to gather moisture. He twitched beneath Richie’s throw blanket, cold with his absence. Good god, he better not be near that kitchen. Pop tarts or not he’d kill them both. Stan burrowed beneath the fabric as he reached up to scratch his throat, not willing to quite save them both yet when the cloy of sleep was still creeping along his skin.

His fingers found soft skin beneath them. His eyes shot open. There was no collar. Fingertips slid across skin, not willing to believe it, only to find no metal edges. His hand skated along the side and - no

bump - no *tracker*. Had it all been - had -

“Richie?” He whispered, head still beneath the blanket. Too scared to reach out. To hope. To *hope*.

His fingers paused. A new line was along his spine. Raised and hot.

His hand left his throat to grab the sheet, he dragged it away slowly. The blank gray wall stared back him.

He sat up slowly. Mechanically. He didn’t even have any choice but slowly, his muscles ached, back pulsing with effort as he shifted forward. His hands went back to his neck. The line was still there. And two inches of his hairline were missing. A small gap in his curls as the mark traced past his skull and at least three inches below his shoulders. There were no stitches. No staples. Just a welted scabbing line. They cauterized it.

The door slid open. Stan didn’t look up. Didn’t want to look up. Droplets fell to the sheet pooled at his waist. Air was becoming difficult. But he couldn’t even find it in himself to panic. He was just

Just

numb.

“You shouldn’t look so down,” Rory chirped, “It’s the latest in the line. You’re like... the shiny new prototype. That’s kind of cool, right?”

Stan’s throat clicked, too dry to... he didn’t know what. He didn’t know.

“Here,” She offered and a straw met his lips. He didn’t grip it. Didn’t do anything, “Suck, 51186.” She said softly, digging the straw against his gums. He took a pull, if only so she’d stop.

She reached for her wrist, “Good...” She tapped it, “Boy.”

But there was no shock. No jolt. Instead a soft wave sluiced through him. A mollifying curl through every inch of him. Water dribbled from slack lips as he gasped. His head dropped, knocking the cup

before Rory could move it, “Whoa,” She laughed, pulling the now soaked sheet and empty cup from his lap, “Guess that works,”

“W...” He felt sleepy, cathartic as his brain tried to find words, “Wh... at,”

“Bliss brush,” She said, “Well, working title, alliteration is popular. See, no collar anymore, what’d I tell ya?” Stan shook his head, not following as the pleasure rippled away, “That itchy thing was tossed for the fancy wire network instead. No external pieces, no more burns from the electricity. The sensors are hooked up to the frontal lobe and all those decision making spots. Certain parts react when you chose something aggressive or impulsive. Others when you are calm or behaved. It was expensive, god, but they figured out where to put what. So you, 51186, are patient zero!”

There were pins in his - his -

“54495 and your roommate only got the aggressor state. No reward for good behavior, but also much more appropriate in public than what they had before.” She reached into her scrubs to pull out a small dish of lotion and coated one finger. Her cold touch dragged up along the scar. She took a moment to brush his curls. Stan didn’t move. He had become stone. A shell.

“It’s not perfected yet, so no automatic stimulation has been set up,” She shrugged, but then tapped her wrist, another rush went through him, horrible and wonderful. He drooped against her, she held him. Stroked his hair. He wanted to vomit, “But the dopamine and electricity - well, more of a muscle stimulant now - are still set up for on command use. So now there’s a real reward to being good. A present for being a helper,” She leaned in close, until Stan met her eyes, cupped his face in a mocking gesture of those he cared about, “Isn’t that great?”

A figure appeared behind her. Tall. Red hair. Stan blinked through the last of the endorphins flushed over him. It wasn’t Robert. He tried to jerk away, but his body felt too sated to even shift out of her grip.

“It certainly is,” Big Bill laughed, smile crooked.

Stan opened his mouth. But nothing came out. Cold blue eyes met his own. The left twitched. His smile didn't waver.

"Hi, S-Stanley."

Notes for the Chapter:

. . .

17. meringankan

Stan had been a brother to Georgie just as much as Bill. Honestly - he was more responsible with the baby. Bill wanted a playmate, a friend; another Stanley. But Stan's momma had told him how fragile the bright red bundle could be. How he needed protection more than play time. Stan had tried to warn Bill too, but Bill was too excited at the big wet brown eyes to do anything other than love him with abandon.

Bill dropped Georgie on his head when he was nine months old. He'd been trotting around the den with the baby on his hip and tried to hop both steps into the kitchen at once because it made Georgie squeal when they went airborne.

Georgie had screamed instead.

The smack to the ground wasn't far, which was apparently the only reason the tiles didn't cause any damage beyond an egg and a bruise. They would have to watch him for brain damage. Track his development.

Bill had never seemed more broken than that moment. Stan had held him while they cried in the urgent care. Bill had needed a hug, needed comfort. His parents had offered none. It was his fault after all. And a five year old was a big boy who should know better.

"Y-Y-Yo-yo-"

"For Christ's sake, William," Mister Denbrough spit, "Shut it."

Stan held him closer, let Bill put his tear and snot soaked face against his ear even if it made Stan's skin crawl so he could try again.

"Y-y-you ne-e-ee-ed to prote-c-ct him," Bill whimpered, whisper soft, "H-h-h-ee,"

"You protect him, Bill," Stan promised, "He loves you. He still loves you,"

The hiccuped sobs didn't ebb, but Bill squeezed him closer.

“Ww-w-we both w-w-will,” Bill said instead. A compromise.

“Yeah, Billy. We both will.” A promise.

They protected him together. Side by side. Until Bill couldn’t. And Stan didn’t.

Bill didn’t approach Stan. He didn’t charge with rage in his eyes. Didn’t throttle him down onto the bed and make Stan feel every moment of hell he must’ve suffered since they were twelve at a cliffside. Bill hardly left the door frame, stepping only to let Rory move past when he’d jutted his chin to cue her exit.

Stan only saw the syringe in her hand once she was told to put it away.

“He needs a bath -” Rory had tried to insist.

“- I’ll deal with that.”

“Mr. Denbrough, it’s protocol -”

“- Do we need to have a conversation?” Rory froze, some expression other than placidity taking over her mask, “I’m getting tired of being courteous, leave it on the table.”

The needle was set down. Rory skittered past Bill and out of sight.

Stan had braced for it the moment the door clicked shut behind Bill. But he felt unable. Too many new nightmares flying around in his - his - *surgically altered* brain to follow anymore. Bill Denbrough was the horseman riding in on Stan’s personal apocalypse.

But the other didn’t approach. Didn’t go for the kill. He didn’t even speak. Easy smile still across his scarred face. Stan didn’t want to provoke him. Trigger him into violence.

But, honestly, what more damage was there to do?

“Was it you?” Stan finally asked, whisper soft.

“No,” Bill answered. He still spoke with the same inflections. Slow words coming out one by one. Carefully. Not wanting to catch a stutter.

Stan nodded. It didn’t make him feel better. Bill was still here which meant he had access to *here*. A small clicker twirled between the fingers of his good hand. This one had two buttons.

I’m sorry didn’t feel right. Stan was. He had been for years. But. Seeing what was left of Big Bill in the flesh made his attempts fall silent. What could he really say?

“Is...” His throat clicked, “Is Eddie okay?” He anticipated a shock, but Bill just slipped the remote in his pocket.

“54495 is in the medical ward. Ruptured tendons and multiple compound fractures along carpal and the ulna. Apparently there’s an infection from how long Robert left him there after you dropped,”

But alive. Eddie was alive.

“Robert wants to make an example of you, weird piece of shit,” Bill scratched at his temple, nose scrunching as he spoke, “He’s -”

“Can I see him?” Bill looked confused, “Eddie,” Stan clarified, “Can I see Eddie?”

Bill didn’t answer for a long while. A mix of amusement and awe masked ticks of frustration that Stan recognized even after years.

“Wow,” He finally mumbled, “You’re like looking at a ghost.”

Stan swallowed, “I haven’t eaten in awhile. That might have something to do with it.”

“There are multiple bruises and lacerations around the throat, further trauma to vocal chords, partially collapsed airways... Last I checked you did all that,”

A hot indignation grew in Stan, a rage, "I didn't -" He took a sharp, long inhale through his nose, "I promised him I wouldn't hurt him,"

"Well, you never were good with others,"

"Why are you here?" Stan finally spit, throat clogging, "If you want to kill me, just-"

"... What? Just what, Stanley?" Stan hated how Bill said his name now. Tainted. Benevolent.

Bill was taunting him. The fresh slice along Stan's spine ached.

"Come on," Bill said, finally approaching the bed. Stan shuffled away, nerves grating as Bill stepped closer. The pull in his chest was unwanted and uncomfortable. Almost a phantom limb to what they almost were for each other. What Bill had wanted them to be.

"Where?" Stan asked, back flush to the wall. The plaster stung against raised skin.

"You heard her," Bill answered. He fiddled with the abandoned syringe before popping the cap off. Stan jolted away as Bill grabbed his throat. His head was jerked to the side, a searing ache along the laceration. But a cold dribble found his hairline as the needle twisted up and away from his skin. It rested against his scalp; slowly emptying without purchase. Bill tossed the emptied syringe aside and ran a hand through Stan's hair. The curls absorbed any runoff, sedative wasted.

"Bath time."

Stan hadn't followed him. Hadn't willingly gotten out of bed and trotted along to whatever sick game Bill was planning.

Mainly because he couldn't seem to get up at all.

He'd refused at first, feet digging into the thin mattress, until Bill grabbed both arms and tugged. He hadn't been violent or even forceful. He simply just pulled him along with Stan unable to put up a proper fight.

But Stan's knees buckled as his soles found the floor. He collapsed against Bill, eyes cloudy with humiliation. Bill hadn't laughed, or mocked, but slipped his grip to Stan's armpits and lifted him back up.

"Do I need to grab a wheelchair?"

Probably. But the idea of being carted felt worse. He couldn't fight back even in theory in the chair. So Stan shook his head, and Bill sighed a laugh like he would when Stan was too scared to cross over the makeshift log bridge as kids. One of Stan's arms was draped over Bill's shoulder, the other boy's hand with a firm grip on his wrist.

The hallway was overly bright, blinding even. Stan felt uneven, off kilter, like all the noises around him were too loud yet muddled. Dregs of anesthesia still crawling in his veins. Bill was practically carrying him by the time they made it through the doorway. Stan's feet dragging beneath him, weight sagging against the taller boy.

The hallway was so loud because it wasn't the hallway Stan knew. The differences were nearly indistinguishable, but Stan had stared at blank gray walls for weeks. And this was... different.

The doors had handles and labels. Half the rooms were lined with glass instead of drywall. The same color palette carried through, but there was activity in lieu of silence. People hustling around them, a few lingering stares at Stanley that left his neck hot when before people didn't even seem to *see* the guides.

"Wh... where are we?" Stan whispered, voice barely audible. But a few around him looked up. They could hear him.

Sentinels.

"Medical ward." Bill said simply.

Stan halted, full weight dropping to Bill. He ignored the other's grunt of annoyance and tried to stagger back to where they'd come.

“Ed -”

The jolt was horrible. No longer a taser, but a full body revolt to a current he couldn't place. Stan collapsed to the floor, jerking violently out of Bill's hold as the torture overcame him. It was gone as soon as it'd come, but Stan was left gagging on the floor. Was this what Eddie had felt? All those times?

Bill stood over him, dropping to a crouch to brush a stray curl off of his gasping face.

“I know you're smarter than that,” Bill mumbled, “Now get up.”

Stan didn't argue.

The elevator ride felt a little like a cruel joke. Bill swiped them in and up they went. Up up up. Stan couldn't even relish the skyline as he'd done before. Not when he kept crawling further away from it.

Endless concrete snuffed it out soon enough. A few more beeps and the doors opened behind them. Robert's office stared back.

Stan knew the way from here and didn't let himself linger on how Bill seemed to know it too.

“Just sit,” Bill mumbled, depositing Stan onto the lip of the tub. He rocked slightly, teetering for a moment just too far back before a three fingered grip caught his shirt.

Stan couldn't lift his arms enough to get his shirt off alone - muscles still raw from cuts and stitches. He half wanted to just tip back into the water clothed. Kick up a shit ton of water. Maybe drown. Who knows. But Bill maneuvered the cotton free and disposed of his sweats and boxer briefs as well. He didn't make Stan sit in his nudity for long, he hardly looked at him as he lifted the boy and set him into biting hot water.

The water stopped just below where his incision began. Bill grabbed a rag, dunked and rang it out, and laid it across the seam line. Stan hissed at the contact, but after the initial shock the heat felt a little nice. Numbing.

Stan didn't know what to expect, his mind reeling through every option; each more horrible than the last. But Bill didn't reach for him, didn't shove him beneath the water, didn't touch him after dropping the cloth along his back. He just sat there. And stared.

Stan looked anywhere but at him.

"There's no drugs in the water," Bill said, "So I'm just gonna assume you're able to wash yourself,"

Stan grabbed the bar of soap beside him, and scrubbed at his arms half heartedly. Bill was still watching him.

"What is it about Richie that made you slip up?" Bill asked, one leg swinging as he stared at Stan, "You were off the map for years. I couldn't find you anywhere and within," He laughed, "A few months you just... blew it."

Stan didn't respond. He slipped lower into the basin, but Bill grabbed him before his chin could reach the water line.

"They're still watching."

Stan looked at Bill. Looked at the tension in his jaw. At the twitch of his nostrils.

"What are you doing here, Bill?" It was the first time Stan had said his name. Had really acknowledged the haunting in front of him as anything other than a spectre. Bill's whole body seemed to ache at it. A tug ripped in Stan's chest. He ignored it.

"Why don't you answer my question," Bill mumbled, "So I can decide how to answer yours?"

"He -" Stan's throat clicked. He thought of Richie. Of his smile. His stupid jokes. His vulnerability.

His willingness to let Stan leave if that's what Stan wanted.

"He was different. I don't know..." Stan smiled as his eyes stung, "He liked me,"

"I did too," Bill said.

Stan snorted. He drew his knees up, letting his head rest against them, "What you liked about me changed,"

"You changed too. We were compatible,"

"But you wouldn't have let me go. You wouldn't have allowed it," Stan mumbled, his finger dragged swirling ripples through the water, "Richie saw *me*,"

"So, what, he's just - better? He was better than me?"

"Yes."

Bill laughed. It sounded like his father, "He didn't seem like hot shit when we talked,"

"What? When?" Stan's head darted up, searching Bill's face for a lie.

"A few times. He's got this weird thing where he never shuts up,"

Stan rose up, wobbling, modesty forgotten, as he tried to find footing, "He -"

Bill's hand shot out, "Get back in the tub, Stanley," He pressed down, and Stan crumbled, "Now," Bill's other hand went into his pocket, "Pretend I shocked you,"

Stan tried to lean forward again, "What's going on?"

"Do I need to make it real?" Bill growled.

Stan jerked sporadically, letting himself fall below the water line in order to hide any chance of being unbelievable. Bill reached in and pulled him up a moment later.

Stan gasped for air. He peered through soaked hair sticking to his skin at Bill. Bill who loomed over him, blocking out the lights above them. Big Bill. Impossibly big.

Just like the bullies.

He didn't move away from Stan, but a strain seemed to take his eyes. He opened his mouth once, twice, but no words came. Only a soft, "I -ah-I-I,"

Stan just watched him. Watched him fall back to slide to the floor. Watched him become level with Stan as he rested against the wall of the tub. Bill didn't look at him. Stan didn't move.

"He's got Piper," Bill said, "She's cute. Looks like the drawings G-Georgie used to do for you,"

"Well, she has about nine less wings. But... same idea," Stan offered, watching Bill crack an empty smile.

"He missed you when you left - drew you pictures for when you'd come back,"

"Did you tell him what happened?"

"No," Bill said, "I didn't tell anyone. I didn't believe it really. Not for awhile. I kept waiting for you to come back and tell me how you'd tried to save me when I fell."

"I..." But Bill didn't even bother to cut him off. They both knew it would've been a lie, "I didn't want to leave him," He said instead.

"He loved you. Still does. You're his big brother too. You were at least,"

"So you work for them now?" Stan asked, desperate for anything but where that could lead, "Keep any more kids from getting hurt?"

"I did it to find you. I -" He laughed, "I don't... I was going to bond to you."

Stan looked at him, he could only see his neck. His unmarred neck.

"I would've thought kill me. You hate me."

"Well, I do," Bill said, like he was commenting on the weather, "But I didn't want you to hurt anyone else. I wanted to just -"

“- Own me?”

“At least I’m not a *killer*,”

“How would it be any different?”

Bill didn’t answer.

“Well, you figured it out. I’m here. You caught me.”

“I told you, *I* didn’t.”

A chill took Stan. A fear. He didn’t want to ask. But Bill seemed to be waiting for it.

“Was it Richie?”

“Was what Richie?”

“Bill, please,” It was a desperate, pitiful sound. Stan knew it. He did, but -

Bill stared at Stan for a long moment. Then a moment more. He dragged a hand along his face, thumb picking along the bottom seam of his scar.

“No.” He finally said, “His manager. Chase. Contacted us, we bugged the house before you two had arrived. Needed concrete proof before we could move against someone high profile like him.”

“Can they hear us?” Stan mumbled, voice hardly drifting through the fog of the room.

“No,” Bill said, “Audio didn’t capture well enough with the humidity,”

“Because you,” Stan slid in the tub, moving closer to Bill, “You never answered my question.”

“Well I’m not the criminal here,” Bill said tautly.

“No, but, you’re the one making conversation with one. And I’m pretty sure I’m going to pass out if I’m in here any longer.”

Bill's face twitched and he pulled himself up from the floor. Stan tried to reach for him, but stopped himself. Bill went to the shelf of towels.

"You said you don't want me to die," Stan cracked.

Bill didn't move. He twisted the towel between his fingers.

"I'll die if you leave me here. I - they -" A sob bubbled in him, "Do you know w-what they -"

"- The procedure," Bill mumbled, words slower than before, "Patient zero."

"I'm not going to be their pet," Stan swore, "I'll die first. I will. They won't be able to stop me. I'll bite through my tongue."

"You've never had a high pain tolerance,"

"*Bill*," He begged.

Bill didn't look at him anymore. He unrolled the towel once, twice.

"Get out of the tub. You need to dry off," Stan didn't move until Bill pulled him up. The huge towel was wrapped around him. Swaddling him. Suffocating. Bill pressed each end into Stan's own hands, "Hold this, I need to grab you some clothes. Unless you feel like walking around naked," He pushed Stan's grip until the boy's fists closed. The fabric was plush against his left hand. His right crinkled. A stiff square pressed against skin.

Stan went to uncurl his grip on reflex, but Bill's hand crushed down against his own. It hurt, for the first time too forceful, but the fire in Bill's eyes was staggering. Stan couldn't blink, didn't risk it. He gripped his hands to his chest.

Bill grabbed the clothes.

Stan didn't relent his grip on whatever Bill had put there until he was deposited back into his medical ward room. Kept his arms crossed to hide his clenched fist deep in the crook of his elbow.

Bill half carried him back, and dropped him onto the bed. He patted the closed fit in what looked to be a mocking gesture, but his eyes were heavy.

"You'll be here until they're sure the neuro-collar is stable. Get some sleep," He said, "You missed dinner."

"Could I..." Stan wasn't sure if any of this was real anymore, if Bill was anything close to someone he could trust, "Could you take me to see 54495?"

Bill huffed a breath, thumb scratching along his scar, but spoke without whisper, "Eddie is in this hall. I can see about a nurse taking you to him; but I doubt it. They want to sever your bond first."

So the room wasn't bugged, not as far as Stan could tell. The floor was clearly meant for those requiring of more luxury and modesty than the guides. The injuries were serious enough to need the higher end care.

Stan nodded.

Stan sat there until the door clicked shut. He waited a moment longer before rolling onto his side, curled in on himself, and letting his forehead rest against the wall. It felt crazy - but the bed seemed too wide without Eddie hogging it beside him.

He waited longer to open his hands. Sleep wasn't creeping, not anymore, but there was a dread in his throat. Stan wasn't sure he wanted to know what was in his hands. What Bill decided to give him.

It was a piece of paper. College lined notebook. Folded impossibly tight into a square not even an inch wide. Stan opened it slowly, hands shaking, curled around to block the camera without suspicion.

Hang tight psycho

A wet laugh bubbled out of him. Hiccuping giggles giving way to choked sobs as he read it over and over. Three words. Fifteen letters. Scrawled handwriting with crooked g's that fell lower than the rest. He bit his lips, clamping down to try and contain the noise of - of - euphoria that just leaked through him.

Stan knew, on more than one level, he should destroy the note. Rip it up, flush it, eat it - anything. But. the paper was transparent in three places. Little dots of wear. Tears. The edges were soft, torn away, corners creased. Richie had been careful. Prepared it. Trusted Bill.

Stan's maniac was asking him to hold on just a little longer.

He folded up the note. Pressed it as small as he could manage. He turned it between shaking fingers, measuring it the best he could, before slowly edging it into his left ear. The paper ached, scratching along sensitive skin, but he shoved until he was sure it wasn't visible unless someone went looking. He could hear his blood pulsing, a heavy thump creating a metronome against his pillow.

Stan wasn't sure how long he waited. How long he had *hung tight* until the lights in the halls flickered to a soft blue. The rooms Stan could see from the glass door had dimmed down to a smooth inky darkness. It was late. Two nurses without any form of weaponry beyond the bracelets would exit at random intervals to do a sweep of vitals, but the gap between them was huge.

He watched the taller one, a girl with red hair, wander out of his room and back to the door across from him. Their break room. He wasn't even hooked up to a machine, she'd just brush his hair away to rub ointment on the scar line and leave.

Stan kept his eyes shut, face soft, fingers unmoving. The door clicked open... shut... another door... shut again.

Stan slid off the bed. His socked feet made no noise against tiles as he crouched, doors too pristine to squeak as he moved. Eddie was in this hall. Eddie was close. He could feel it.

There were only nine rooms. Eddie was in the seventh.

Stan had moved fast, easily deciphering between different silhouettes and passing them by just as quickly. But - Eddie - he'd hoped he'd had it wrong.

The sheet was pulled up to his neck. Beeps ringing out in different pitches and times, a morbid lullaby as Eddie slept surrounded by machines. His neck was in a brace, a tube down his throat, another in his arm, the other -

Stan swallowed back a sob.

The sheet dipped flat just past where his right elbow should've been. Bill had mentioned an infection, but -

"Eddie," Stan cracked, wobbling over to his side. He looked worse up close, huge eyes sunken into fevered freckled skin, "*Eddie*, I,"

Stan brushed the hair from his face, up and to the side how he liked it, how he'd tug it constantly with no product to keep it stiff. He'd always use his right hand. He *wrote* with his right hand - he -

A wheezing breath cut through the fog clouding Stan's eyes. Free hand shaking, Eddie went straight for the tube jammed between his jaw.

"Eddie, Eddie, wait," Stan whispered, taking Eddie's hand between his own, "It's okay, I - it's okay, just breathe. Just take a breath. It's helping, I promise,"

The machines were beeping rapidly, and Stan didn't know how reliable under the bed hiding would be if the nurses rushed in, but any worry was lost once Eddie finally looked at him. When glassy brown eyes met his own and realized it was *Stan* and he was *here* and they were *alive*.

Sitting up was a task, but Stan didn't try to push him beyond keeping his hand free of the tube. Eddie scratched at the accordion plastic, brow tight, and Stan didn't think before blurting.

"What, were you gonna say something?"

They stared at each other, gaping, before the most pitiful and wonderful wheezy Eddie laugh trickled out. Stan's mouth hung open until a disbelieving giggle snuck out. Followed by another. Until the two were curled tight, heads brushing, hiding laughs like it was a sleepover.

It was only then that Eddie noticed and Stan remembered. Stan felt it as much as he saw it. How Eddie halted, then turned to stone against him. How his eyes began to stare yards beyond Stan, unwilling to look to his right. Unable to see what more they had taken from him.

The tears weren't unexpected. But Eddie didn't move. Didn't shout or thrash or even sob. He just sat there as water fell. Stan wondered if that's what he'd looked like when he'd woken up too... if it's how Eddie looked the first time he woke up from their surgeries.

"Hey," Stan whispered, barely a breath between them. His hands both rose slowly, gently meeting the skin of Eddie's wet cheeks finger by finger until he cradled Eddie's face between shaking palms, "Look at me,"

He had to say it twice more, just as softly, until Eddie responded.

"It's going to be okay. We're going to be okay."

Stan had planned to come into the room with the note still scraping his ear. With the promise of escape, freedom, *retribution* - but that... that didn't seem right at this moment. This horribly delicate moment. Private moment. Eddie didn't need wild hopes that he'd just lost with already so much ripped away. He wouldn't believe it. Wouldn't want it.

Eddie gripped Stan's neck, middle finger finding the cauterized line. Neither moved. But Eddie slid his hand further, palm warm against the scar. Firm. Stabilizing.

No, Stanley couldn't offer what he barely hoped was true himself. But Stanley could just be here. And promise what he'd promised before. What he'd promise until he couldn't anymore.

"Stick with me, kid."

Eddie tapped twice.

Notes for the Chapter:

sorry this one isn't as long, there are some things coming up that i want to set up right, didn't wanna jam them in just for the sake of it.

lemme know if it sucks

18. ευκολία

The tests were as uncreative and predictable as Stan had expected. A nurse came in with a foam ball and told Stan to hand it to them. If he didn't, they'd shock him. If he did, they'd 'reward' him. Sometimes it was Rory, sometimes it wasn't; but every time it was the same.

"Again. 51186, hand me the ball."

Five... four... three... two... one -

Stan grit his teeth, curling in on himself as he sat on the bed. The nurse, thankfully not Rory, blinked and waited.

Ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three -

"Again. 51186, hand me the ball."

This one didn't even give him the full ten seconds. Dick. Stan waited, eyes trained on his feet, counting down.

... two... one -

His head came between his knees as his breakfast tried to make a reappearance. A hand shoved him upright, the order came immediately.

Stan's hand shot out for the ball, holding it up like a fucked up game of catch. It was snagged from his shaking grip.

Nine times, he'd made it nine times. His record was twelve, but this one shocked him for longer jolts - he was sure of it.

The *bliss brush* cooled his nerves and left the eggs in his stomach well up into his esophagus.

"Good," They said, voice softer but just as flat, "Good job."

Ten... nine... eight... seven... six...

"Again. 51186, hand me the ball."

Godammit.

"Again."

It went on for two hours, by what Stan could guess. They couldn't shock him too much too fast, for fear of permanent nerve damage in their new refined system. They also didn't go by how often he obeyed. He tried it once, just to test the theory. Every time handing over the ball until he was drooling and genuinely thought he might piss himself from lack of muscle control. They wanted him to crave the brush, to desire it. But it just felt like he was either drunk or sick. Maybe they were just counting on a lesser of two evils then.

But it had been nine days of it. Eighteen hours of training, of trying to break him. Stan... couldn't tell if it was working. He didn't think so, still hated them, still disobeyed until he just needed a second to breathe. But isn't that how this worked? They turn him until he doesn't even know?

They didn't remove Stan from the Medical Ward. Whether that was Bill's doing or not; Stan couldn't be sure. The note - the note had been everything. Was everything. A biting ache in his ear that stabilized him through every test and prod and jab. But Bill was still here and had been long before Stan was handed to him on a platter. The trust wasn't, couldn't, be there - but a mutual... confidence was held between them.

Bill hadn't *said* not to tell about the note, but Stan figured Bill would get whatever placated equivalent punishment Sentinels suffered as much as Stan would be maimed.

A cough rattled beside him.

Speaking of maimed.

Eddie shifted beside Stan, huddled in on himself as he dosed. Stan never laid down beside him, ready to bolt for under the bed if needed, but he kept an arm around the other boy. One of Eddie's knees was digging into the meat of Stan's thigh. His torso curled around him until Stan could feel slow puffs of breath against the cotton along his spine.

They took the breathing tube out six days ago. Eddie had vomited twice with nothing to heave up, ragged gasps as his jaw was freed. Stan hadn't been there to help him, locked away in his unlocked room. Just staring at the shelves and cabinets of tools and supplies locked away on his far wall until the dome lights glowed softly and the halls became still. He went to Eddie then, socked feet sliding across tiled floors until he could see the little shit and breathe again.

Robert had threatened a whipping boy. A tool against him. But Eddie had brushed death one too many times for Stan to want to lose sight again.

The tube had been a great way to keep him from moving, but now a single cuff held his remaining wrist to the bed frame. It wasn't the same flat to the sheets one Stan had awoken with when he'd first been brought to hell. A softer cuff, practically a pillow, that held his hand in a plush netted fist. A cord connected between cuff and bed, giving him a few feet of slack - enough to sit up or twist in the bed. Stan didn't know how he pissed, if they let him up or not. He felt it better not to ask.

Eddie didn't ask about the tests and Stan didn't ask about the bathroom issues. They just sat together. Sometimes Eddie would be awake, as alert as the sedatives let him be, and Stan would whisper stories about anything that came to mind. Sometimes they were books from childhood, sometimes they were funny stories Bev had spun.

Sometimes they were things Stan would hope for. How Eddie would get so sick of Richie but put up with him since Ben liked when they all hung out together. How Richie would make jokes about how close Eddie and Stan were and Bev would smack him before Eddie would bother to. How Mike made the best food and Eddie would sit on the concessions stand and eat lemon bars while Ben pretended he wasn't excited about a project and Bev would tease him until he blushed and Eddie did seeing that look on his face. Or they'd all be on the roof sharing a bottle of wine and Eddie could sit in Ben's lap and kick Richie for laughing when Stan did the same thing. How they would be together and happy and nothing else mattered beyond which bar they would go to or what to get for take out.

Those stories made Eddie cry. Silent, fat tears falling as Stan promised hypotheticals like biblical truth. Stan had tried to stop once, the first time he'd noticed what his words had done. But Eddie gripped him fiercely and shook his head until Stan started again. They hurt, but they were necessary. Something to cling to.

But other nights, like tonight, Eddie couldn't stay awake for more than a moment. Apparently losing a limb to infection really did a number on you. Stan would ask how much Eddie hurt when he arrived, "One to five, unless we're into feet now and you wanna try for fifteen," Eddie would usually smack him with a smile, and that meant it was at least no worse than three. But tonight he just lolled forward into Stan, arm to his chest, face heavy. It was a five night tonight.

So Stan had rubbed his back until Eddie could fall under the sedative spell again. And he didn't move him no matter how asleep his leg was becoming or how badly he needed to pee. He'd wait until the monitor to his right beeped four times - a fluid refill needed - and he'd slip back to his room before the nurse would trot in. About an hour later the lights would change and Stan would try to sleep as long as they let him.

The great thing about traumatic neural procedures was that no one questioned the rings under his eyes. Little victories.

Stan hadn't mentioned the note yet. He didn't know why. There had been nine days since he'd found Eddie, and four days where Eddie was alert enough to respond to it. The paper had become softer with the heat of his ear canal and admittedly coated in a few sheens of wax that Stan didn't let himself think about too hard.

But the note had told him to hang tight. And that was nine days ago. Two hundred sixteen hours ago. Twelve thousand, nine hundred, and sixty fucking minutes ago. The tenth sun was rising soon, and four beeps called for Stan to dislodge himself from the roly poly bug that was Eddie. The boy groaned in a weirdly silent way, a muffled honk almost, as Stan slipped down to the floor.

Maybe tomorrow, if Eddie was feeling better. Tomorrow Stan would tell him. Would give him something to cling to with Stan. Let him see

the opportunity on the horizon. Let him see the horizon again at all.

Stan looked at him, the sheen of sweat across his brow, his pinched mouth as he groggily begged Stan to stay. Stan leaned forward and kissed his forehead. Eddie flicked his ear, nearly missing the lobe but Stan swung his head back as if struck by a brick. Eddie rolled his eyes, but it was enough.

It was enough that the door behind him slid open. Squeaking sneakers abruptly halting just like Stan's heart. Eddie was looking over his shoulder, eyes horrified and wide. Stan didn't turn. Didn't move. Didn't breathe.

He stayed there. Crouched down on one knee beside Eddie's hospital bed. The sneakers approached. He waited for the jolt. For the shock. He prayed they wouldn't shock Eddie too. He was too weak right now. Too fragile. He needed to be allowed to rest, to survive -

A hand gripped Stan's shoulder. Eddie's own hand shot out to grab the wrist, to protect him even while strapped to a bed and down a limb. Stan intercepted it with little care if he was punished for sudden movements. He pressed Eddie's hand flat to the mattress, staring into his wild eyes, nearly feral as he looked at the monster behind Stan.

The look was horrible, rabid, and Stan nearly thought it was Mr. Gray coming to take them both. But the shoes had squeaked. No click of brogues, but athletic shoes. Rory wore sneakers. Oh god -

Eddie's hand jerked, as the grip on Stan's shirt moved to his scar. Stan clung to Eddie, whether for restricting Eddie or grounding himself - he couldn't say. The hand was huge. Massive.

"You're healing better than I'd expected," The voice was deep, "And still a troublemaker."

Stan's head tipped up to meet the slanted eyes of Dr. Geier. He looked exhausted, nearly bored. Not enough of anything in his expression to even seem cruel.

But he'd branded them both. Seared numbers into skin like they were

objects. And if he was here... he'd probably been the one to cut off Eddie's arm.

"Now," He said, hand leaving Stan's neck to check his arm band, "You have about forty seconds before the lights come on and the nurses pull their heads out of their coffees to start rounds."

Stan stared, waiting for the other shoe to drop, "I-

"- Thirty," Dr. Geier said, "It's too early for anything exciting, so just go back to bed,"

Stan looked to Eddie, desperate for some explanation, but Eddie didn't take his eyes off the lumbering man.

"Fifteen, kid," His voice was heavier. Darker.

Stan took off.

He felt sick leaving Eddie with that man. But - the echoed silhouettes of Rory or Robert seemed to track him. Geier had let him go.

Stan's ass had barely smacked into the mattress before the lights flickered on around him. A few moments later the patter of nurses began. He was still shaking when Rory skipped into the room.

Stan didn't think she was supposed to be here, he'd seen her every day on his normal floor, but she'd been here like clockwork since Stan had been reassigned. She always looked happy to see him. It made his stomach turn.

"You're lively today, huh?" She laughed, already leaning in closer than ever seemed necessary, "You're sweating, are you okay?"

Yeah, just locked in a prison and his only friend had his arm sawed off, "I'm fine," He swallowed.

"Well, I know you don't like needles," Rory began to fiddle with a key until the far cabinet unlocked, "But we gotta get some samples to check your blood work. Make sure nothing nasty is happening in response to the transplant,"

Stan didn't respond, instead just looked away as she tied the rubber cord and flicked his arm. Her thumb pressed the wipe deep against his elbow, digging until Stan winced. She didn't let up until Stan finally looked at her, confusion on his face. She smiled and relented her grip.

"Don't go dozing on me," She snickered, and brandished the needle right in his eyeline. He didn't look away again, enough sense in him to realise she wanted him to watch. He stared at her brow instead of the sliding drag of the needle into his skin, pretending to watch her watch him. It took what felt like ages for her to finally cap off the last vial. Stan only looked away once she bent his arm with gauze wedged against it.

"You did great," She said, voice sweet as she pat his cheek, "I'll be back for afternoon rounds, don't miss me too much!"

He nodded, desperate for her to leave and only letting his back fall against the bed as the door slid shut with a soft click.

If Rory had found him in that room. If Rory had cornered him in a dark space.

A cold shudder ran through him.

"She's an odd one," Dr. Geier said from the doorway. Stan jerked upright, accidentally whapping his head on the wall as he shuffled back. "Easy, tiger," The doctor grumbled, "Just here to run diagnostics,"

"Why..." Stan swallowed back the words. Why did you let me go? Why did you not report me? Did he really want the answer to it?

"I don't really care for troublemakers," Geier said, unlocking the stool from the clear cabinet cover. The entire medical shelf was boarded up, nothing to catch edges on, nothing to steal,

Nothing to kill himself with.

"But the..." He waved his hand, "Bureaucracy is too much for me. The fights for power and containment of ability and whatever else. I've got a wife and don't plan on having kids because I know what it's

like out there - in here - and my cats are enough for me. You're my patient as much as that other boy is and I'm doing my job. I don't think anything more of it,"

He rolled over beside the bed, "Now don't think I'll let you out of here. I'm not one of those either - lie on your front, please - but I don't see a point in shocking you like a dog or making this worse than it has to be."

Stan didn't roll over, didn't move, "But you branded me."

"An unfortunate processing necessity," He hummed, "But again. I'm not letting you out of here. Now please lay on your front, shirt off,"

He didn't reach for Stan, didn't go for his bracelet, didn't do much of anything except yawn after a few moments.

"Why are you doing this?" Stan asked quietly. It didn't have the rage or desperation it normally did when he asked. An answer didn't come for a long while.

"I hated the doctor as a kid, and the testing for Sentinel and guide DNA was nothing short of traumatic," They used to think they could find it in blood samples, when children were small. That was years ago, after the trouble but before technology could catch up enough to realize they weren't anywhere near understanding it yet.

"Anyway, I hated that feeling and my wife felt the same way. You're going to be getting a lot of unpleasant things here. You drew a shorthand and there's nothing to be done but deal with it. But," He scratched along his hairline, following the steep curve, "I figured you might as well have something resembling normality. Why be needlessly cruel?"

"Do others do that?" Stan mumbled, already knowing the answer.

"Not too many, luckily. I'm not too well liked here. Got a few doctors canned for inappropriate behavior with their patients," He didn't elaborate further.

"But you won't help us,"

"I'm a coward," He said simply, "I always have been and I don't see it changing any time soon. So, no. I won't. But I try to tell myself I help how I can."

He seemed to be done with the subject and gestured for Stan to lay down.

"Can I," Stan swallowed, "Can I stay sitting up?"

Geier squinted, but simply in thought, no malice behind it, "Sure," He hummed, "It'll be worse though, you'll need to curl forward,"

"Okay," Stan said as he pulled his shirt off, "Okay..."

The wall in front of him cast a massive shadow of the two of them. It felt a little better to be upright, if nothing else. They hadn't done a diagnostic before, but - "Applying the gel," Geier muttered, before a large hand found his scar.

The hand prodded gently along cauterized tissue, asking if anything was sensitive as a viscous gel with a sharp scent was coated along various points of his scalp, neck, and shoulders. The hands kept touching the spots, massaging deeply but careful along the scar.

"Is he okay?" Stan asked.

"Fine as can be expected," Geier answered, "No infection, surgery went smooth, kept as much of the arm as I could. He'll still have a lot of function since part of the forearm is there. We're looking into even doing a prosthetic - though that's not really my worry until they put him back on my operating table," Stan's skin began to sting, a cold tingle that made him squirm, "It's a numbing agent," He explained, "It won't help with the worst of it, but I find it at least dulls some of the bite,"

"Bite?"

"This will hurt," Geier said, keeping one hand on the steeple of Stan's spine as his other rummaged in whatever he'd grabbed from the wall, "But don't be alarmed by it. It's normal,"

A soft buzzing began, and cool metal found the bottom of his scar

before a soft, “Three, two, one,”

A hollow thunk sounded as Stan felt a thick needle stab into him. The salve helped noticeably, he only knew he'd been stabbed at all from the dull pressure of whatever Geier was holding. But the needle hit something, some barrier, and Stan bit back a yell.

“Would you rather I not count?” He asked, “I can just set it off, you have twelve more to check,” Stan nodded, shoulders shaking by the third.

“This is a neural response test,” Geier explained, as he clicked once more, Stan lifting his own palm to bite into, “The wiring in your brain is set to shoot responses through different areas of your body. What I’m checking is if the connections are still responsive for whenever they get the automatic recall set up. A needle punctures through the skin and hits the response nanod that make up the stimulants of the device. It’s reading how deeply into your system it goes. It’s sending a pulse through the response nanod back to the core of the device. They’re incredibly shallow, above the muscle in fact, but the salve only helps so much,”

Stan found it hard to listen, but tried as the punch ran through him once more. The probe dug against the base of his skull, his shoulder blades, his neck. Dr. Geier didn’t stop talking once, a steady drone of medical jargon until he finally said, “One left,”

“Open your mouth,” A gloved hand slid two fingers between his teeth, pressing steadily down onto his tongue. The device, now in Stan’s peripheral, was no more than a few inches long, a thick plastic handle with a small metal dome on the end. There was a hole in the middle, dotted with blood, “Breathe in,” He did, raggedly, as it pressed just below his adam’s apple, “Out,”

The scream punched out of him. His teeth tried to snap together, but the grip beside his molars kept him from probably biting through his own tongue.

“Worst is over,” Geier said, removing his hand from Stan’s shaking jaw. Stan felt himself sway, and the spit wet hand caught his collarbone before letting him tip softly into the wall. His hair was

matted to his face, stuck between skin and plaster as he gasped.

“Now just the physical left.”

“I...” Stan gasped, breath shaky as he tried to right himself. He needed a moment. He needed -

“I offered to in place of Nurse Trevino,” Geier said, voice farther away as he messed with the far wall again, “She has enough patients to tend to that I don’t need her lingering with you. Lie on your back, please,”

Stan looked over his shoulder, cheek flat to the wall. Dr. Geier wheeled himself back over with a small tray at his side. Stethoscope, tongue press, otoscope, blood pressure cuff -

Otoscope. Fuck.

Stan only took a second more, forehead resting against spackled wall, before letting himself dip sideways. Even the thin pillow felt rough against his full ear, but he curled on himself, hand up to reach, and said as pitifully as he could manage, “I just need a second,”

“It’s nothing invasive,” Geier said, voice warbling as Stan’s nail jabbed harshly to catch paper, ear canal opening and blocking as he tried to be subtle, “Just vitals and any muscle issues from the connections to the neural map,” He almost had it, fuck, his nail curled over a crease, tugging vervently, “C’mom,” Geier insisted, moving over him.

“Wait -” Stan croaked, eyes wetting from the sharp pain in his ear, “Please, I -”

The note snagged free, and Stan turned his face downward to heave a breath, shoving his hand beneath the pillow to let the paper go, before finally turning over. Geier looked almost apologetic, but it was hard to read through the beard.

“I should’ve probably done the test last,” Geier admitted, “But I didn’t want you more nervous knowing something was coming after the physical. Tensing would just make it worse,”

Stan couldn't imagine it hurting much more than it had, but the cloth wiping away excess gel and dots of blood felt nice enough. A shuddering ache still ran through him, though that might've had something to do with punching the sensors connected to his nervous system with a needle thirteen times.

The physical was quick enough, efficient, and didn't linger anywhere. He let Stan lie down as he checked his eyes, throat, and ears - which were mercifully clear. Stan only really moved when he had to be sat up for his knee reflex briefly, and then turned to his side for his lungs.

Maybe it was the raw relief at feeling the small lump of paper beneath his head, or the almost trustworthy clinical manner Geier was working, or even just knowing it *wasn't* Rory doing it instead; but Stan felt himself falling asleep.

He hadn't even realized he'd shut his eyes until the click of cabinets made him open them. Geier packed up the rest of his equipment and went to the door.

"If I catch you out of your room again, I'll have to report it," He said, looking back to Stan, "I'm not here to save you. I'm just keeping you healthy. Don't make it difficult."

Stan's throat clicked, exhaustion seeped deep in his bones, "C... congrats on your wedding," Geier's brows lifted, "You were engaged when you processed me,"

"Ah," He hummed, sheepish smile, "Stay out of trouble. Or at least don't get caught. Maybe I'll get time off for a honeymoon."

Stan didn't wait to return to Eddie, Geier's warning be damned. This place had cracked something in him, torn away a sense of preservation to make room for raw survival. And Eddie? Eddie was more important than consequences. Eddie seeing he was okay and

Stan making sure of the same was more than anything else right now.

Eddie was awake, though he didn't look any better off, when Stan arrived. He even tried to get off the bed before the cuff reminded him where he was. Stan ran to him, half stumbling up the bed to hold him. Eddie was still at the limit of the arm restraint, left arm taut behind him. His bandaged one hovered around Stan, not willing to touch him. Stan just held him tighter. After a moment the right arm settled along his back, too weak to squeeze, but present just the same.

"It's okay," Stan whispered, "We're okay, Eddie. We're okay," Eddie snorted in disbelief at the flagrant overstatement, but held him impossibly closer.

"He let me go, he didn't report me," Eddie nodded, Geier might have told him as much when Stan left, "I'm sorry I left you with him - I -"

Eddie pulled back, shaking his head with a firm expression. Stan slumped against him, suddenly exhausted even though he'd passed out the moment the doctor had left him. They both moved more to the center of the bed to give Eddie access to his arm once more.

Eddie dragged fingertips across the sore red dots that assuredly graced Stan's skin. They felt like bruises, already scabbed over but raw just the same, "Collar test," Stan mumbled, "Had to check the sensors."

Eddie looked furious, but Stan just leaned against him, just letting himself be near him. They were bonded, Stan could feel it now that it'd been brought to his attention. A thrum different but identical to Richie. More gentle, friendly, almost invisible. Richie felt urgent, necessary, vital. He'd felt torn apart when they'd dragged him away. Like his core had been ripped away. With Eddie it felt like a blanket. A sense of security, belonging between them.

The note was in his hand, Stan almost couldn't uncurl his fist from how hard he'd clung to it, how close he'd come to losing it. He held his hand between the two of them, wax filmed paper cradled like a treasure. Eddie looked confused, which, admittedly, also looked angry. But he never really *didn't* look angry so Stan was just going to

have to go for it.

The note itself didn't have the personal meaning it did for Stan, but the shock across Eddie's face meant he'd understood enough.

"They're coming," Stan whispered, "They are, I know it, Richie and Mike and Bev and *Ben* ," Eddie looked wrecked at the promises, but shook his head. Stan didn't believe it at first either, doubt had settled enough in him, but Eddie seemed panicked.

"No one's seen it," Stan promised, "I hid it in my ear, they - shut up," He muttered at Eddie's disgust, "We're getting out of here,"

But Eddie was gesturing as much as he could, arms as wild as his eyes. Stan didn't understand, "Eddie, what -"

He began to count with his fingers, rapidly, then point downwards, over and over.

"Floor? What? I..." He paused, so did Eddie, "Floor number?"

Eddie nodded. He pointed past Stan to the end of the hall and back the other way to the office.

"But, Bill gave me the note he," Eddie shook his head, anger back in place. He didn't trust him.

The variables flew through Stan like wildfire. Bill could be playing them both. Bill could've told them the wrong place. Or set them up. Or *any fucking number of things* .

Eddie counted again and pointed to the far end of the hall. He then held his thumb and pinkie to his face, curled knuckles against his cheek. A phone. He pointed back to the office.

Stan needed to tell them where they were. He needed to get to a phone.

"I - there's people in there," Stan explained, "Nurses, the ones that check on you,"

Eddie held up two fingers. Stan nodded. Eddie gestured to his

machines. To all the wires and plugs around him. To the slack in his cuff.

“They’d see in a second,” Stan whispered, “You can’t just unplug yourself, they’d fix it in two seconds,”

Eddie shook his head. He pointed at the machines again. Stan followed his finger. To the beeping heart monitor.

“Eddie, no -”

Eddie gestured to the end of his cut arm, but the motion was clear. Stan looked at the IV drip bag, “A few hours, but I can’t - you can’t -”

Eddie snagged his foot from under the blankets and nailed Stan with sharp kick. His ass smacked the floor, spine jarring at the tile beneath him. Eddie pointed to the bathroom door, resting ajar. The look in his eyes was feral.

“Eddie -”

g o

Eddie couldn’t make noise, not any that counted. But the sound out of him was as close to a snarl as anything. Stan moved. Sliding to the dark bathroom door, creaking it just enough for him to slip out without sound.

Stan didn’t look at whatever Eddie did. But the beep of the monitors went haywire and the strangled gasp tore at Stan’s heart. He could hear tears of what must’ve been bandages and sick wet sounds before two sets of footsteps came flying into the room.

“Hold him down!”

“Stop it, dammit, what the *fuck*?!”

Stan didn’t wait, and slipped out and into the hall. He saw red painted across Eddie’s sheets, but swallowed the bile back.

He nearly crawled across the floor, keeping low just in case, as he came to the elevator. There was no number. No way to tell. Fuck.

Fuckfuckfuck. There was only a digital screen to the right for wristbands, displaying the floor as LOBBY with neat black letters.

Stan crouched there, helpless as Eddie did god knows what to make one of the nurses yell. Then, just below the cry, was a metallic *whirl* as the LOBBY slowly changed to 2... 3... Stan shoved his ear against the door. Hearing soft dings as it ascended. Please let them pass him, please let them pass him...

A chime echoed in the hall, right against Stan's ear, before fading once more. Stan jerked away to the screen. 28 now.

27

Floor 27.

The office door was open, flung nearly against the wall. The emergency lights cast warm hues across the half lit room. A cot on the far wall had sheets ripped away. A chair next to a half burned cigarette sat overturned. They'd both run for it. Stan halted at a large light above the monitors.

ASSISTANCE NEEDED

It was unlit. The button for it still behind a plastic case with a small film of dust. No one was coming.

Stan found a phone on the desk beside the cigarette, buried beneath papers from disuse. There had been a cellphone on the bed, but a thumbprint was needed. Stan yanked the phone closer, lifting it off the cradle to hear a sweet dial tone answer back. He pressed one and dialed quickly, eyes watching the door.

"Thank you for calling The Falcon," Stan's own voice echoed on the message, "To speak to -" Stan pressed one. They all went to the same thing. Mike just thought it sounded more professional. Beverly had laughed when Stan tried to sound jovial for it.

It rang once... twice... god, the last movie should still be going, Stan was pretty sure it was the weekend based on what the nurses would say to each other.

Three times...

Fuck, he didn't know if he could leave a message. Should he code it? Stan didn't know any codes, fuck, fuck -

"Hello?"

Stan stopped breathing. A lump ricocheting up into his throat.

"... Hello?"

His knees wobbled beneath him, papers cascading around him as he slumped to his knees, voice still stuck.

"Fuck off, ass -"

"*Richie*," Stan gasped, a bubbled sob breaking out of him.

"... Stanley?" Richie answered, voice deadly soft, "Stanley, is - fuck - Mike! Bev! Stan hold on, are you okay? Talk to me, are you -"

"I'm -" A hiccup choked him, "Richie, I,"

"Oh my god, Stanley, oh my god," His words were faster than Stan could follow, "How did you - *MIKE* - talk to me, baby, please,"

"I miss you," Stan whimpered. It was all he could think to say.

"Jesus *fuck*, I miss you too," He stumbled, the office phone was corded, he must not be able to get to the door. He should put the phone down to get Mike, Stan should tell him to, but...

Maybe it was the shock, but his voice wasn't registering anymore. Just a hum in his head. Just.

"I missed you, darling," Richie laughed, leaning deep across the counter, as if he could watch each dot of blood bloom across Stan's

cheeks.

"Fuck off, Richie," Stan mumbled, already turning to grab an icee for him.

"That's a solid three out of five stars on customer service, might have to Yelp that," He said, "The Falcon has a cute and rude employee you keep coming back for - four stars,"

"You said three,"

"What can I say, you have sway over me?" Stan nearly dropped the icee at the choice of words.

"Don't you have a movie to catch?" Stan asked instead, fighting a smile as Richie jammed a straw into his drink.

"Well," Richie hummed, taking a long pull of frozen sugar, "I could. Or y'know, you could catch a movie with me?" The dusting of pink under his glasses betrayed his expression of confidence, "I mean, it's packed in here, but I'm sure you could spare a moment,"

"That's a great idea!" Beverly cried from her treacherous return from the restroom, "Stan loves *Better off Dead*, the ending makes him cry,"

"Wait, really?" Richie snickered.

"Bev -"

"- The view from the projection booth is shit," Beverly insisted, pushing Stan past the fold up counter entrance, "Have a pack of buncha crunch on me, I'm sure you'll put money in the register for it out of Jewish guilt before five,"

Stan stood there, pack of buncha crunch in slack hands, as Beverly made herself scarce in the back room. Richie looked, admittedly, just as stunned.

"Uh..." Richie mumbled, blinking before sticking an elbow out, "Shall we?"

Stan stared at the arm before carefully sliding a hand through,

making sure their skin didn't touch, "Don't try anything, Tozier, I eat my candy and I get back to work,"

"Oh but of course, Darling, I'd never try anything saucy in a courtship!" He laughed, eyes bright.

They wandered into the theatre, Stan already moving to the left end behind the wheelchair row before thinking that, hey, Richie would know he was *watching him sit there*. But Richie didn't seem to realize, just plopped in his same seat and patted the one next to him with a cheesy grin. Stan sat gingerly, before letting out a squawk as his candy was yanked from his hands. Richie held it in his opposite hand, far out of Stan's reach, and Stan stretched across him before realizing how close his nose was to Richie's own and firmly dropping back into his own chair.

"That's rude," He grumbled, eyes on the previews for upcoming pictures to The Falcon.

"You said when you're candy is gone you're outta here, and I've seen how you eat m&m's. This is purely a safety precaution," Richie propped his feet up on the bannister as he opened both of their treats. Stan kicked beneath his knee so his foot dropped with a startled laugh.

"No feet up, company policy," Stan let his keds balance against the upper rung, dropping deeper into the seat.

"Sure thing, Stanley, sure thing," He held the opened box up, but only tipped two pieces into Stan's palm. Stan stole a sip of icee in annoyance, but gagged at the overly sweet artificial fruit. Richie just laughed and gave him another piece.

It took forty minutes to finish the chocolate. Richie had started to tip his own m&m's into Stan's pavlovian hand before he realized the bite of candy coating as opposed to crispy bits. Richie's feet had joined his own after the final preview.

There was no one else in the aisles. And Stan would bet money Bev or Mike was up in the booth watching out. Richie said a soft, "Back to work?"

Stan kicked Richie's foot off the rung. Richie laughed and put it back up between Stan's own. Stan didn't move him. He didn't get up until he saw Richie asleep as the credits rolled.

"- *Stan!*" Richie shouted into his ear, jolting Stan back into awareness, into the room, why he called. Fuck, how much time had passed.

"We're on the twenty seventh floor," Stan whispered, "In the medical ward. I don't know if there are multiple, I don't -"

"Bill told us, yeah, said he was keeping you there," Richie promised, "Stan, please, breathe. We're coming, I promise, you and 54 whatever-the-fuck are getting the fuck out of -"

"51186."

Time didn't halt as it'd done before. It didn't feel faster either, more of a sluicing crawl. An inevitability haloed into dome lights like the devil. Stan held the phone tighter, receiver digging against his jaw. The frame in the doorway wasn't massive. Wasn't large. It was, inevitably, worse.

"Eddie," Stan whispered, staring into Rory's wide eyes.

"What - Stan, what's happening - what's wrong?"

"Tell Ben, please, it's Ed -"

The phone flew across the room as his head hit the desk.

Notes for the Chapter:

i am very sorry, my dudes. leave a comment. let me know if it sucked.

19. hänga

Noelle Gayla was not exactly the messenger Richie had been expecting. Most of the time secret messages didn't come from blue haired, patchwork covered hobbits. She wouldn't make eye contact with either of them - though if that was from Richie's manic posture or Bill's freaky ass face - he couldn't say.

But she stood there, toes tapping a quick rhythm that Richie learned in grade school to make his brain come back to the front. She was a Sentinel. A fucking short one.

"I'm," He took a breath, swallowing down the need to hit Bill, "Sorry, no autographs. Or, uh, photos, I'm..." He gestured between him and the dick on two pegs, "Rehearsing a role, sorry, closed rehearsal, but -"

"- The guide told me to find you," She rushed, "Curly hair, short, kind of a smart ass?"

Richie paused, voice only carrying between the three of them with their hearing, "... Stan?"

"I mean," She shrugged, unsure, "He didn't have a name listed. Just - like - blood type, which was weird,"

"I'm sorry, *what?*"

"S-s-she screened for h-him," Bill said, "Comp-patible if she saw information,"

Richie looked back at Bill, then to the girl in his doorway, and back again. He didn't know what to do with this, she'd - she'd gone to take Stan. But was here. But -

"They electrocuted him," She said, voice soft, "They gave me a button to do it too - I didn't!" She jumped at Richie's livid face, "But he said they kidnapped him. Stole him out of his house. I..."

"What did you think they did?" Richie sneared.

Noelle's face sharpened, brows pulling together, "My family has a guide, and she's practically my aunt. She never said anything about being taken or tortured or anything. I - thought this shit was gonna be like awkward *speed dating*! And then the guy,"

"Stan," Richie insisted, needing his name to still be a part of this. To not reduce him to something Other.

"Stan," Noelle amended without pause, "Stan starts whispered shit I'd never heard except on like, deep web conspiracy shit. And then they tasered him like it was nothing! For talking to me!"

She took a moment to gather herself, looking almost as unhinged as Richie had moments before.

"Do," Richie swallowed, uncomfortable in the sudden silence, "Do you want a snack?"

"I'm sorry my entire understanding of reality was shattered like three hours ago, so let's all let me have my moment," She shook her hands, a full body shudder running through her, "Okay, cool. So. What do we do?"

"Stan?" Richie begged, receiver pressing grooves into his palid cheek, "*Stan!*"

A horrible crash had resounded, a sharp cry, and screeching metal dragging. Richie shouted again, voice cracking out in desperation, but no one answered. The line offered nothing but white noise.

Why had he wasted that? Why - Stan was right there. He'd heard him. For the first time in months. He was alive and there and snuck to a fucking phone to call them to help. That fucking psycho. Richie was staring into the phone, like it would offer another chance. Hey there, Tozier! Whoops, sorry about that, lemme just get that kiddo back on the line so you can tell him that you love him! No trouble at

all, here he is!

Mike ran into the room, Bev and Ben close behind, "What happened, are you okay?"

"Stan -" Richie choked, "He..." The room became still. The white noise hummed.

Only Ben jumped when the swivel chair ricocheted off the wall. Richie's roar was brutal, unhinged, before a second kick slid the desk across carpet with a, "*Dammit!*"

Mike stepped forward, Ben holding Beverly back - but she didn't seem keen to encroach on the grieving hostility. The phone was loosened from Richie's grip, Mike pressed it to his ear for a moment before hanging it back up and pulling the cable from the wall.

"Wait -" Richie croaked, "Stan -"

"- Isn't going to answer," Mike said, voice even, holding Richie steady, "He was caught and anyone who hears that outburst is going to know where he called," Mike went over to the answering machine and quickly deleted the recorded message, "We don't want to put him in a worse position."

Ben reached for Richie, passing his shaking form between the two like a marionette. Beverly righted the upturned chair for him to collapse into. There weren't any tears, not yet at least. Only a pale faced shock to his features.

Beverly crouched in front of him, snapping her fingers to draw Richie out of the sink he was inevitably falling into, "Hey," She snapped, "Eyes down here, Richie. We don't have smelling salts so unless you want a sinus full of windex I suggest you get it together,"

Richie looked to her, blinking until his pupils reacted once more.

"There we go," She huffed, "I swear when Stan gets back he's gonna owe me so many cartons for half ass easing you,"

Richie's throat clicked, "He,"

“Is gonna be back in no time flat,” She hummed, “Isn’t that what you say? Rhyming until someone kicks you?”

“Or punches,” He offered.

Beverly softly whipped him on the cheek. He snickered wetly as the pooling in his eyes began, “Hey,” Bev called again, “They won’t get rid of him. Bill said so, he’s too strong to waste. We just gotta adapt and get him,”

“We can’t be reckless,” Mike continued, “But we need to act soon. Call them.”

Mike’s apartment, Secret Base Meeting Lair for Reasons, was just as cramped as last time. But he did have a window that opened onto a patch of roof that Richie and Bev and quickly claimed as a smoking balcony. It adapted to the two rules Mike had.

No smoking inside.

Don’t go in the spare room.

Richie had nearly broken the latter one day. There was someone in there, he could hear them shuffling. He knew Ben heard it too. And Bill once the prick was allowed into the sacred four hundred square footage. Bill never went near the room, he seemed to be in pain when he came in as it was - which - whatever.

A soft knock would sometimes rap twice against the wood. Mike would disappear into the room, sometimes with food, sometimes not, and come out a few minutes later.

Richie, vaguely worried Mike was a serial killer, figured it deserved some explanation. So one day Richie creaked the door open. Three things happened pretty fast.

An ear splitting scream.

The door slamming shut.

And Mike tackling him to the floor.

It was about the point that Richie was half asphyxiated on the living room carpet that Mike figured he would explain.

“That’s my roommate. He’s a guide. A known guide,” Mike’s face was ashen, expression heavy as Richie iced his throat, “I’ve been trying to figure out how to get him out of the city, but I’m not exactly a pro at this so,”

“You know where we all stand on this,” Ben said, hand on Mike’s shoulder, “We wouldn’t risk anything, I mean...”

“Don’t tell Bill,” Mike blurted, voice jarringly loud.

The words came out as a blend of command and plea. Bill was with The Center, they knew, but he’d been helping them for nearly two weeks by then. He had given them incredibly sensitive information. Helped Ben get access to blueprints, documents, a plan was already half formed

“I,” Mike paused, trust probably wasn’t a word any of them would use quickly, “Just don’t tell him. I’d rather not add more to our plate.”

All of them had agreed. A pact within their pact. No one bothered to tell Noelle, it felt like the less ears on this the better. But Richie made up increasingly elaborate secret fetishes Mike was hiding and that was more than enough to entertain Noelle into not bothering to ask.

“What’s in there again?” Noelle asked as she wandered into the front room.

“Japanese body pillows that are sentient and trapped to be pillows forever,” Richie said solemnly, “The dread in their eyes is haunting,”

“Hot,” Noelle laughed, before dropping down to the floor beside the coffee table. Beverly and Ben had taken the love seat with the easy

chair for Bill. Mike gave it to him to help with his legs. Richie told him it was because he couldn't sit next to them. Both were true in ways.

"H-h-how did he...?" Bill shook his head, coffee untouched on the table. Flipping through schedules on a tablet, "Never mind. Well, Rory and James were on that s-shift so," He winced.

"What? What does that mean?" Beverly asked.

"Rory has an interest in him," Bill said quietly, "If she caught him that's going to be worse,"

"Can't you check if it was her?" Ben offered, "Is there a log book or something?"

"I h-have over four dozen cases in my roster. I don't want to draw attention to someone w-w-who is supposed to just be calmly in rehabilitation in the med b-bay," Bill took a sip of his coffee, "We don't need eyes w-where they don't need to be,"

Two soft knocks came from the far door. Mike got up quietly and went to the room. He slipped in without a word.

"Well that's sort of the problem," Beverly huffed, "There are eyes everywhere. Half the fucking thing is glass walls,"

"So we need too many places for them to look," Richie said, "There are six us," He began to point across the table, "Marsh. Haystack. Cripple. Hobbit -"

"- Hey," Noelle cut in.

"- Shush," Richie continued pointing across the room, "Boss. and me. That's a lot of people to track."

"Well the listed repercussions are solitary for minimum four days," Bill said, "Rory wrote it so it might be longer. So l-let's get to work."

They planned and argued and drank coffee until the sun began to peak over the horizon. Sleep crusted their eyes and Richie even removed his glasses as exhaustion dulled him enough to feel beyond

any chance of over focus.

Noelle had fallen asleep against the arm of the couch minutes ago. Beverly looked close behind, but was quietly leaning over her to go over hallways with Bill.

Richie rose from his spot, knees cracking as he stretched, "C'mon, Hanscom," He mumbled, "Let's grab some fresh air."

Ben got up after him and the two crawled out the window. The skyline was almost beautiful. The night sky still lingered with a starless sky cut by buildings as the sun rose behind them. The Center was behind them too. Mike had picked his view with purpose. Pastel painted stucco walls stacked along the horizon as the two leaned against window frames.

Richie pulled a cig from his jacket and Ben offered a second hand to cup against the wind as he lit it. Richie offered one out of courtesy but was already putting it away as Ben shook his head; he never smoked. He just liked whiskey and fresh air.

The two sat there, silence comfortable and warm against the soft nip of winter giving way to spring. Richie let his head rest against brick, hairs catching on spackling but unbothered as he watched his embers glow with each drag. Screeching metal kept echoing in him. Dragging against his bones. The sharp whip of air before impact flying in his ears. He took another drag, pulling until his fingers felt the crackle of fire against them.

"I'm sorry," Ben said. Richie looked to him.

"What for, bud?"

"You shouldn't have had to hear that," They both knew what he meant, "That was horrible. If one of us had grabbed the phone first..."

"It wasn't great," Richie agreed, a lump catching the smoke curling in his throat, "But it was Stan. I got to hear him. Even just for a minute."

"Yeah," Ben agreed. Understanding on a level only the two of them

could. Ben's guide couldn't even talk, just -

Richie froze.

"Eddie."

Ben looked to him, brow worrying at the abrupt change in tone.

"What?"

"His name is Eddie, 54 - his name is *Eddie*."

Richie watched as Ben's eyes grew as the words sank in. As he smiled a wobbly grin with a small wet laugh, "How...?"

"Stan said it, it was the last thing he said," The last thing he said for now. For now. For now, "He wanted you to know. I guess he found your brat in there,"

The both laughed then, a snicker that erupted into stomach shaking booms. Tears streamed down their face as Richie's cig went out between his fingers. Beverly slipped out between them to tell them to, "Shut the hell up, do you know what time it is?" Before Ben pulled her into a tight squeeze.

She looked to Richie, alarmed, but Richie just kept laughing and wiping his eyes. Beverly pulled Ben close. Let him laugh and cry.

Eddie.

Eddie and Stanley.

Notes for the Chapter:

hhhhhhhh get ready my dudes.

i'm sorry for the short update, but it's really more of a bridge to the two big updates that are coming. see you next week.

20. stram

Notes for the Chapter:

CONTENT WARNING

Hey, my dudes. things get a little iffy in this chapter right up in here. there is a whole lotta non consensual touching in a clearly fetishization. click for end of notes for a clearer description but be warned it has spoilers. please don't read if it's gonna ruin your day.

Bill used to haunt Stan. The child, once an intrepid guide, loomed in peripherals as a haunted relic. Medications and blunt force denial could only do so much for a twelve year old in the dead of night.

He'd heard him, whispers of a stutter like steps across his floorboards that never creaked until a red headed boy stood on them. He looked the same, some nights. Smiling at him. A few teeth missing that made the staccatoed t's whistle. He'd hold his hand out and ask Stan to come outside. Sometimes he'd just smile. Smile and smile and smile.

Stan used to dread that the most, but it was better than when he didn't.

Because some nights Bill came to him wet. Soaked beyond the bone. Marrow waterlogged. Pajamas torn and molding over with still water bacteria. Stan hid from that Bill. clung to his covers and clenched his eyes until spots ached in his skull. But Bill would still be there.

Why did you push me?

Why didn't you help me?

Why do you hate me?

"I *don't*," Stan would choke, but there was never a response. Never a reprieve, just torment until Stan would collapse against his pillow in exhaustion. Then the dusty rays of day would cut into an empty room.

avoid touching the blood he *knew* wasn't there. He knew that, he did, he just -

"Y-y-y-y-y-ou lee-e-e-e-efff-f-ft m... m-m-me"

The deliveries of food felt too far apart to judge the length of a day. But there wasn't even a specific light in the room. No shadows to stare at. Nothing

Stan wasn't sure when exactly Bill vanished, but a knock to the metal door startled him into nearly screaming again. The cell was dim, and the sudden shot of light was nearly blinding. Stan blinked once, twice, before a small slat came into focus. Two gray eyes stared at him.

Rory.

"I've brought you some food," A second slat, level to the floor, opened before a tray slid through. It was thick plastic. Nothing sharp to attack with. It had a slice of bread, a bowl of broth, and a cup of water.

Stan grabbed the tray, draining the water; nearly choking in his haste. He heard Rory laugh at him, but didn't give her a glance. He sipped the broth with more pace, careful not to burn his tongue.

The image of Bill also left his stomach turning. But he didn't know how long it had been since he'd eaten. Or when he would again.

"Pass it back through."

He kicked the tray towards her, half knocking it through the slot before she dragged it the rest of the way.

"How're you doing, 51186?" She asked, nose pressing against the edge of the peephole. Stan didn't respond, eyes looking anywhere but

at her.

“I know it’s hard,” She continued, “Solitary is always a rough spot, but you kind of earned it? I mean, sneaking a *phone call*,” She laughed, “That’s insane. You’re insane. But, I will say, it was ballsy. I could hardly believe it,”

That phone call had been everything. Impossibly short. Too short. He hoped Richie told Ben about Eddie. That Eddie was okay. He was the whipping boy, after all. They couldn’t *really* hurt him. Not too much.

Right?

“You’re lucky I found you,” She whispered. Startling Stan out of his growing anguish, “I mean, I have a soft spot for you. There! I said it! Anyone else would’ve reported you to Robert, but I figured you just needed some help. Some alone time. And some with me. One on one.”

Stan looked up at that. Anyone else would’ve... anyone else...

“Does...” Stan began, halting Rory’s tirade, “Does anyone else know I’m here?”

Rory didn’t speak. Didn’t blink. Face serene as she stared at Stan.

“You can’t just make me disappear,” Stan whispered. But his voice was uncertain. Rory knew it too.

She smiled.

“That’s what we do best.”

The peep door locked shut.

A *click* would tick sometimes. Rapid. Sudden bursts. And then

nothing. Stan didn't know what it was, but he almost welcomed it to the silence that came between nightmares.

clickclickclick

Almost.

Sometimes Stan saw Eddie.

Eddie would talk to him. Stan knew he wasn't there - Eddie's mouth would move but no sound would come out. An echo would come instead, a remnant of what Stan thought he might sound liked. Stan wasn't sure if it was really his voice, but it sounded how it had felt when Eddie teased him and that was comfort enough.

He was still whole too.

"How are you even dealing with this?" Eddie not-asked. He was pacing the room, doing loops around Stan, waving both hands, "It's fucking boring,"

"I dunno," Stan mumbled, voice rough, "You're here."

"Is that why you imagined me?" Eddie laughed, "Needed a show? C'mon, Uris, get creative."

Eddie mainly made fun of him. But it was nice. He'd complain about his day, about some imagination of the life Stan hoped he would have.

"I don't know how you want it more creative than this," Stan waved an arm aimlessly, "I have a toilet and everything,"

"You smell like a fucking toilet," Eddie said, dropping down next to him, "We could play a game?"

“Sure,”

“How about you getting out of here? Not a lot of replay value, but a real winner,”

“I never asked you about your mom,” Stan interrupted. Eddie went still beside him. Not fidgeting for the first moment since he’d met him at all, “I can’t, not here, I mean - unless you’re really you,”

“Don’t start going crazy on me, Stan,”

“Fair enough, but,” Stan shifted, letting his thigh tap the one that wasn’t there, “I meant to ask. Even though it made you mad. You deserve someone to talk to -”

“- Fuck off.”

Stan startled at that and looked to Eddie. His face was pinched in annoyance, indignance, but not hurt. Stan realized what he’d said, the cackle that punched out boomed along the walls.

Stan woke to the taste of pennies on his tongue. His cheek peeled off the mattress with blood pasted into his growing beard.

“Y-y-y-yo-you l-l-l-l-l-leh-left m-mme”

The lack of consistency in food and water made sense now that Stan knew he was essentially kidnapped within the housing of his original kidnapping. Great.

Rory would stand there just... watching him as he ate. And fuck, he

didn't have time to think if it was a set up or drugged or anything - every visit felt further apart than the last. Rory was, in many ways, worse than hallucinations - but she provided food.

She also talked.

"You did know that guides are just as sensitive as Sentinels?" Rory expected participation. Solitary confinement participation; partial credit, Mister Uris. Exam next week, don't dilly dally, Sally!

His thoughts were starting to sound like Richie. But with the current track record he was glad to just hear rather than see him.

Stan drank his water slowly, cherishing it, before speaking, "They're not,"

"You're not," Rory corrected, voice sharp.

"... We're not," Stan amended. He kicked the tray back, staring a hole into the wall, "Sentinels have the sensory advantages."

"Yeah, they can see shit clearly and whatever. But *guides*," He hated how she said it, "Can feel things differently than people. There's almost no good pain threshold for guides; their empathetic and neural sway is in their own system just as much as anyone they ease. That's why guides can ease each other."

There was a question there. All lined up. She wanted him to ask how she knew that. He was so tired.

"Can I sleep?" Stan asked instead.

"Come here."

Stan stood after a long silence. She wouldn't leave until he did, he knew that; even if she'd never asked it of him before. A horrible rush went through him, the gray walls blackening as he swayed from rising too fast - though he'd hardly crawled to his feet. The door slat was eye level with him. Rory must have to stand on a box to see through it. The image was a little funny.

"Give me your hand," Rory's own sat just outside the metal edges.

Stan reached through cautiously. He felt more than saw her grip around the meat of his palm, "Now ease me."

Stan blinked, "That doesn't -"

"- Try."

Stan knew she was Leveled. Leveled people didn't have the genetic predisposition to be eased. Whatever doorway was necessary was locked up. But Stan tried, just a nudge.

go away.

The knife was horrible. Stan choked on a shout as it cut into his palm, digging, horrible ohgodwhatthe *fuck* -

It was her nail. She laughed as Stan yanked his hand to his chest. There was an angry red line from where she'd dragged the edge of her nail, a few torn spots of skins beading red, but the skin was hardly cracked. It had - he'd -

"See?" Rory said, delighted, like they were sharing a secret, "You open yourself just as much as you flay open the other person. Your whole body reacts to it, all your nerves are at their most raw, you're awake."

Stan blinked tears out his eyes, backing away from the door, like that could make any difference in their dynamic. She watched him a while longer. But Stan didn't listen. Didn't focus on her. Back flushed to concrete walls and knees to his chest.

"There's so much for you to learn, 51186," Rory promised.

One time Stan saw his mom.

He smelled her before he saw her. A twist of lavender and vanilla

filling his nose and settling a yearn in his soul.

Her hair was as wild as his, deep rich curls that Stan always used to think looked like chocolate shavings. She kept it short, bangs fluffed out and framing her pretty hazel eyes and nose she was embarrassed about in high school.

She told Stan he used to kiss it, when he was a baby. Open mouth presses that he'd copy from her. He'd always kissed her nose, she'd say, it was why she grew to love it.

She stood in front of him as he stared openly at her. She wore a canary and sky blue checkered dress that Stan remembered from his preschool graduation. She seemed so small now. He could tell even from the floor that he was taller. He'd never been taller; even in high school. How long had it been since he'd seen her?

Stan cried then. He hadn't in what must've been days or hours or minutes. But he cried. She made a giggling, "Oh, darling," That she'd do when he was still small enough to trip on his shoelaces. She sat next to him, getting her skirt dirty on the floor as she stroked his hair just as she'd always done. She asked him what was wrong, how could she help, what did her little man need?

"Mom," He begged. Sniffing like when the kids had stolen his yarmulke.

"What is it, baby?" She asked, painted nails scratching through his scalp, "It's okay. I'm right here. Talk to me,"

"I just," He hiccuped, flooded eyes bleeding the blue and yellow gingham together, "I just miss you so much,"

"Oh, darling," She laughed again, "Is that all? I'm right here, your mama's right here."

"I'm sorry," He whimpered, choking on his tears and desperate to hold her but not wanting to move away to even turn, "I'm so sorry, I-I,"

"What've you got to be sorry for, Stanley?" She cooed, brushing his forehead with her palm in long soothing strokes.

He shook his head, another sob choking him, but she just shushed him.

"I love you no matter what, darling. I always have. There's nothing you could do to change that,"

"I... I'm,"

"You're my baby boy," She said.

Stan met her eyes. They were rimmed with red, glassy, her smile pinching in the middle just like when Stan tried not to cry.

He always did look like her.

"You're my son," She promised. Stan moved with her, letting her press a kiss to his forehead. Neither moved, her lips brushed against clammy skin, "You're always going to be my son."

She was gone when Stan opened his eyes.

"There's been a few that look like you," Rory said, casually swaying about as Stan ate. The broth was bitter today. He was slower to eat it, weary to be back in her presence. Watching for the mood to change once more. A door had been opened last time. He could feel it.

"Short, delicate face, fragile," Richie had looked more fragile than him. She continued, "It shouldn't be so hard to find you. You all look the same, once you get past the race and gender shit,"

Stan didn't know what to say to that. He put the bowl down and went to slide the tray back, hopeful to get through this without having to speak, when the door opened.

The door hadn't opened once since he'd woken up here. A static buzzed in his mind, unable to process the change in his surroundings

before Rory clicked it shut behind her. Unable to process almost anything. Her legs seemed to slosh, multiply even, before settling back into one solid set. He was drugged. Seven meals in and she finally did it. Rory kicked the tray through the slot without much care and plastic banged against the far wall. But Stan wasn't looking at that.

She held a razor in her hand.

"Wait," Stan slurred, already backing away with nowhere to go, "Wait,"

"You need a shave, 51186," Rory said, waving a bottle of water, rag, and travel size shaving cream in her other hand, "They can't make it that you don't grow facial hair yet. And you're better looking without it."

"I'm alone in a cell," Stan tried to reason, but Rory was already pushing him to sit on the toilet seat. She stood above him, already fiddling with her supplies, razor tucked behind her ear as she gripped Stan's face to spray with foam.

"I'm here," She said, "And I want you to look nice for me. I'll have to share you soon, higher ups are curious, but I just told them that I'm doing some one on one training," She put the can in her pocket and twirled the razor, "And I'm one of the best. Now hold still."

Stan didn't breathe as the metal dragged down his cheek. She exhaled as the blade slid, a sigh on her lips.

Stan only shuddered a gasp as she wiped the razor with the cloth. He knew he didn't grow much in the way of beard, it looked fine as stubble but was too patchy to fill out properly. He hardly took five minutes to clean stray hair away. She was drawing it out. Enjoying it.

The blade tapped against Stan's left cheek. It stayed there. Resting.

"Try to ease me."

"Please -"

"- Try."

Stan looked at her, impossibly managed to meet her eye. He did nothing. His mind blank. He squinted a bit, just to try and look like he'd attempted.

She sneered and twisted the blade.

A sharp sting needled against leftover shaving cream. Stan tried to jerk away, but the hand holding his jaw held tight. The blade was still in his skin.

"I said try."

"You know I can't -"

The razor left only to jab beneath his temple. Knicking against grain and holding fast against sliced skin. Stan yelled and reached for her arm. She kned him in the solar plexus.

"*Stop,*"

"There we go," She hummed, and knicked him again. It was white hot, searing. Like a needle wedged beneath skin. She did it thrice more before letting him go.

Stan collapsed to the ground, curling away into the wall. Blood dripped off his face. Rory moved closer, crouching in front of him. She pressed the rag to his face, enveloping it in terrycloth, obscuring his sightline of her.

"It's okay," She said, "You did great. You'll get better."

He didn't move away from the wall even after she left.

clickclickclick

Maybe Eddie would be indulged if he knew Stan always imagined him yelling. He thought about asking the Eddie currently going on a *tirade* about how annoying Richie was - like they'd all met before - but it wouldn't really lend any new information.

Instead, he picked at a scab, "Do you think we'll get out of here?"

"What kind of bullshit is that?" Eddie scoffed, "Of course we will, 'hang tight' or something?"

"Yeah," Stan agreed, like he always did, but the days were too blurred to have much confidence in anything.

"You look like you wanna say something,"

"I wouldn't know," Stan joked, "I haven't seen myself in awhile,"

"Well, you look like shit," Eddie quipped, "but at least the beard's gone."

A shudder ran through Stan. The cold dig of the razor. The gray metal reflected in gray eyes.

"I dunno," Stan said, trying for levity, "It felt fuller, could've been nice,"

"Richie would love it, I bet. *Stan the mountain man* or some shit," Stan laughed. Eddie did too. It took a long while for Eddie to break the trance. To be close enough to demand Stan's eye contact.

"Grab the razor next time she tries it."

Stan swallowed and looked away. Eddie was there too.

"You have to kill her."

"Well then we're never gonna get out," Stan mumbled.

"Stan," Eddie sighed, eyes heavy, "You need to stop with the 'we'."

He was gone before Stan could rebuttal.

“Y-y-y-y-y-you le-e-ef-f-ff-ff-f-fft me-ee-ee”

Rory shaved him again four meals later. She reopened the scabs and made eight new cuts. He only cried through one of them.

clickclickclick

“You’re gonna die in here,” Eddie said from behind him. Bill kept mumbling his mantra, seated in front of him. It was getting crowded, “You know that, right?”

“Y-y-y-y...”

“I know,” Stan mumbled.

“You know?” Eddie spit, “Are you going to do anything about it?”

“What do you want me to do?”

Stan blinked and Eddie was in front of him. Their noses brushing.

“I want you to get the fuck up!” Eddie snarled, “I didn’t die for you to give up!”

Stan flinched, “You’re not dead,”

“I didn’t lose an *arm* for you to sit on your *ass*,”

“You’re not dead, Eddie -”

“How do you know?” A bloom of mottled purple began to spread across the boy’s throat. His words became tight, wheezy, “You left me in there, how many strikes am I *really* gonna get?”

“Y-y-y-you le-eeft m-m-m-me...”

“You nearly killed me *yourself*, Stan,” An indent began to form, an invisible garrote tightening around his throat, visibly twisting and crushing flesh. Stan reached for him, fingers dragging on his throat, trying to stop the compress.

“Stop it, you - you -”

The words were nearly inaudible, Eddie’s eyes began to pool red, screaming through his lack of oxygen, “You think they won’t kill me?! You think you can just sit here and let me die?!”

“Y-y-y-y-ou...”

“And for fuck’s sake,” Eddie laughed, not looking away as his throat corseted tighter, until all the edges of vertebrae protruded, “You can’t even shut him *UP*? Jesus Christ, trapped in here with you two?!”

“Eddie, *stop!*”

“*You should’ve just killed me yourself!*”

Eddie’s expression froze. A slack jawed betrayal across flat eyes. Stan froze too. Suddenly. Eddie tipped. Stan gripped him. Catching his

jaw.

The rest of his body fell away.

Stan held Eddie's severed head. Face white with horror.

Eddie blinked.

"I thought you were my friend."

Stan screamed.

"How many guides have you killed?" Stan asked before Rory could begin whatever hell she'd decided on today.

She looked confused, before rolling her eyes, "I don't kill anyone, I'm helping you,"

Stan didn't look at her, but a bubble of hysteria clogged his throat at her tone.

"You really believe that, don't you?"

"I *know* it," She assured him, "They all come in crying and yelling and demanding this and that. But I make them understand."

"You know," Stan mumbled and he could hear how she leaned closer in interest, "I thought Robert was the worst thing here. Maybe even Patrick. But..." He shook his head, "You're just... fucked."

She didn't even drug him this time. Just grabbed him and pinned him to the mattress, razor already out.

"They don't love you like I do," She promised as Stan swallowed his shrieks. He wouldn't give her what she so clearly wanted, "Every one of you. I make you better. I make you beautiful."

Stan's head was pressed to the side. Eddie's detached head stared at him. Mirrored gashes along his freckled cheeks. His face split in time with Stan.

"You're gonna be so pretty, 51186."

clickclickclick

Rory didn't bother with the door slats anymore. She'd just appear - an illuminated silhouette. Imposing and inevitable.

Stan tried to block the door. Just once. Just this *once*. He could feel the phantom dig of the razor and just - couldn't. Not again.

"Move, 51186." Rory commanded, but Stan didn't move, heels aching as skin dragged against the cold floor. His back shoved against the door, what little adrenaline he could muster sluicing through his weary veins.

"No," He gasped as she shoved again, "You said no one knows I'm here. You can't call for help -"

"- 511-"

"- Fuck you," Stan spit.

The door slammed against him, over and over, until he was sure either the hinges or his spine would crack. But then it stopped. So suddenly that Stan held his breath, bracing for the next assault, until his lungs burned.

But Rory was gone. Stan had won, and even the smallest victory left him nearly drunk with optimism. He'd starve her out. She couldn't kill him, he was an asset, so someone else would have to come to her aid. Take him out of this box and back to a more familiar hell. Back to Eddie and filtered air and his escape.

The floor slat clanged open. A hand gripped his shirt before he could scramble away. A needle stabbed into him just below the dimples of his back. Stan tried to stay against the door, a final resistance, but his muscles loosened and he could do nothing but slump against it. His body tipped as the door opened, catching skin and dragging him across the ground.

"I really thought we'd made some progress, 51186," Rory chided, "Honestly? I think you like this - me hurting you." She gripped his hair. Stan let out a slack jawed groan as he was dragged, "That's okay. We'll know you're ready when you ask me for it."

She propped him against the wall, legs awkwardly splayed across the mattress. Her fingers stroked across his stinging scalp.

"You all learn to ask for it."

Stan couldn't tell her to go fuck herself, but his stare must've been effective enough since she rolled her eyes with a laugh. Rory dropped to sit sideways between his sprawled legs thighs, her own legs crossed over one of his own, leaning against his chest in a horribly violating way. Her curls brushed his chin - a sick parody of the intimacy Richie and he had been offered only moments of. His arms hung dumb at his sides, useless as Rory made herself comfortable.

"I brought you something," She hummed, smile on her face as she pulled a thick manilla file from under her arm.

URIS, STANLEY THOMAS - 51186 - guide

It was unsettling to see his name written out, unfamiliar, like it didn't belong to him anymore.

"You've got a colorful history," She said. The file was flipped open on her lap. She tugged Stan's head down, unable to hold it up on his

own, forced to rest on her shoulder angled at the pages.

She let out a delighted laugh, “Aww, look at you!”

The first page had four photos of him. The first was a school photo, scanned from what must’ve been his yearbook and blown up in scale, slightly grainy and out of focus. He was eleven there, wide smile and one tooth missing in the bottom row. His hair gelled back by his mom, little blue polo buttoned all the way up. Written below it was a date and GUIDE MATURATION. That had been four months before Bill. Back when childhood was still a possibility.

The second was his senior portrait, labeled: LAST SEEN. He’d avoided cameras after that. He wasn’t smiling in that photo, uncomfortable in the required tux.

A grainy, pixelated photo was after that. He wasn’t even in focus, but the image was clear enough. Beverly was holding him, both their eyes wild. It was a body camera. Maybe Greta’s - maybe someone else’s who had captured Betty. God, Betty. It was labeled: EVIDENCE OF EASING.

He was unconscious in the final photo. A collar freshly locked around his neck. Tears tracked down his cheeks. His head was on Robert’s lap. It was from above, face tilted dead center. A mug shot.

CONTAINMENT

It was the one Rory was pointing at.

“You look so cute here,” She continued, “Almost like you’re asleep. It’s sweet,”

It was horrifying. Violating. She flipped through the pages easily, like it was a familiar scrapbook. She stopped on yellowed newspaper preserved in lamination. A photo was there too, printed in black and white beside the headline.

TRAGEDY! YOUNG SENTINEL FALLS OFF QUARRY CLIFF

It was younger than they had been. The two boys there were no older than four. Stan and Bill hugging delighted with paper crowns on their

heads. Towel capes covered in pipe cleaners and pom poms. It had been the preschool play. They'd all made crowns and capes of their 'kingdoms' and did a little show about family. Stan didn't remember it, but his mother had that photo framed on their wall.

"You nearly killed him," Rory said, snapping Stan out of the memory of two boys who didn't exist anymore, "Both legs amputated, multiple broken bones, punctured lung? I mean, you might as well have," Her hand came to his face, nails finding and aggravating the pocketed skin where she'd marked him, "You're a fighter. A little hellraiser. I knew it when I saw you."

Stan looked at the picture instead. Blinked the trickling blood from his eye. It fell to the photo, two splatters marring Bill's delighted face.

Rory laughed.

"Y-y-y-y-y-you l-e-e-eff-f-f-ft m-e-ee"

"I did."

The voice was higher, and Stan knew that the severed leg Bill wasn't there anymore. Instead wide four year old eyes flicked to meet Stan's exhausted ones. His crown had his name written on it with the 'B' backwards. Bright red pom poms covered his blue towel. There were two dots of blood on his cheek.

"I left you there," Stan said, "I'd hoped you would die. I was sure you had."

Bill's lip wobbled, a hiccup as he fought the wail that was surely building. He had always hated crying, would make a terrible pinched face to try and hide it. His feet tottered in place, soft short legs shifting about as he stood.

“W-w-why?”

Stan sighed, “I was scared that you would tell. Or your dad would know. Or anything else,”

“I w-w-w-wouldn’t have t-told,”

“Not on purpose,” Stan agreed, “But I mean. Look where you are now. And look where I am.”

“D-Do you th-hink I w-w-would have ever h-hurt you?”

“Not on purpose.”

“I l-l-l-l-lov-vve you, St-taney,” That’s right. He never said his name right until second grade. Stan used to tease him about it. Staney and Billy.

“That,” Stan swallowed, “That wasn’t enough.”

A sob hiccuped out of him at that. High and reedy. Stan looked away from him, somehow worse than the zombie could’ve ever been. He’d loved Bill. He’d loved him more than anything once.

He’d loved him with the abandon only a child could allow.

“I-I-I am t-the way I am n-n-n-now bec-c-cause of you. If you h-h-helped me ww-w-we could have m-made it. I w-w-would’ve kep-pt your secret.”

“...I know.”

Bill stopped visiting after that. The gore of his mattress was replaced with the sweat soaked linens of before. It was quieter without the stutter. People must know he was here now. She’d pulled his file and that thing had looked confidential. It was just. He just had to wait. A

little longer. Sometimes Stan would hold his breath until he could feel his heartbeat in his ears. Just for a sound. Any sound.

A coo trilled to his right.

There was no sense of hesitation, no dread to turn to the source.

Because even in the deepest cruelties of Stan's psyche: he could never hurt Piper.

"Hey, Pipes,"

She was tottering over to him, wings fluffing her into a ball but never spreading; still too scared to fly. That was okay. She'd have no room in here. Stan held out his hand and she scurried towards it, talons clicking on concrete. Stan held his breath, tried to stop the shaking in his arm, she hated being jostled. She'd nip his ear. That's okay, she could bite the whole damn thing off if she wanted, he'd give her the world if he could.

"That's it, Dear, I missed you," Stan whispered, voice falling into the tune he'd always hum to her, "I missed you so much,"

She paused before hopping into his palm, little cooes chirping as her head flicked this way and that, inspecting him. God, please, c'mon.

"I never left you on purpose," Stan swore, finding tears in all his dehydration, "I would never leave you,"

It seemed to be enough for her and the soft flutter of down feathers against skin was deliverance.

A metal scrape dragged behind him. Stan pulled Piper close, cradling her like he'd done countless times. Protecting her.

His hands came flat to his chest. Empty. She was gone.

Rory held his food out. Like a lifeline. Like a bear trap.

"Wait..." Stan whispered.

"Did you miss me that much?" Rory laughed, sickly soft.

"You said there were others," Stan mumbled, stomach tight even after inhaling the food on the plate, trying to keep Rory talking. If she talked, she tended to go on tangents until she ran out of time to stay.

A little longer.

Rory paused from her playing with Stan's hair. She'd been leaning over him, touching him like a toy. Like an object.

"What? Oh," She dropped, her knees cracking as she squatted before him. Stan flinched away as her eyes became level with his own, "Yeah. They were all pretty."

"What does that mean?"

"The trouble with what you are," She sighed, waving a hand at the general shape of him, "Is that I can't *keep* you. You get assigned and shipped off with a bow on you and someone else gets to enjoy the fruits of *my* labor."

"That," Stan swallowed, "Doesn't seem fair to you,"

"It isn't!" She agreed, eyes shining as she continued, "It's not fair at all! I worked so hard on 31274, you should've seen him. He had the cutest hair. Kind of like yours, but black. Thicker."

"... How old was he?"

"Sixteen. He wasn't as much of a pain as you," She giggled, rustling his hair, "But I think the harder you work, the greater the reward."

"Did you cut him too?" Stan asked, unable to stop himself. A cold agony in his heart for the kid that had been here before him. How long had he been locked away? How often did he see things that weren't there while Rory laughed at him? His friends? His parents?

A little longer.

"I tied him up," She whispered. Her eyes held a - a cruelty that Stan had never seen. An enjoyment.

"He was claustrophobic. Couldn't even stand the collar. So I tied him up until he'd ask me to," She held Stan's face. Made him meet her eyes, "I helped him."

"He was a kid," Stan choked.

"He's a guide," She said. Like they were different, "I really wanted to keep him. Almost as bad as I like you. I mean, you're the best, 51186. Keep me on my toes! But the pictures I took just have to do."

A cold weight dropped in Stan's stomach.

click click click

Vomit rose in his throat, the food he'd scrambled for moments ago fighting to escape him. He looked away from her, risked her anger, if only for his own sanity.

Eddie stood in the doorway. Holding his own head.

Speaking of sanity.

He stared at him. Eddie's brow rose, waiting. An idea.

"Could you..." Stan swallowed down bile, "Could you show me?"

Just a little longer.

Maybe Richie had already come and gone.

Done whatever sensible idea that Mike had probably made sprinkled with Beverly and Richie's unreasonable but well intentioned plans. Ben would help too, he was smarter than anyone gave him credit for. Quiet but resilient.

They'd saved Eddie. Maybe. That was something.

Stan laid on the mattress. Staring at the same ceiling that he'd stared at for days or maybe months.

Four shaves.

Twenty one cuts.

Richie wasn't coming.

"Well that's some bullshit."

Stan didn't look. Eyes stinging as his chest swelled at the laugh he'd ached for.

"Look at me, Stanley," Richie asked, voice gentle. Stan shook his head, tears dripping along raw skin and into his hairline, "Stan my man," Richie sang, voice adorably nasal and the sweetest side of off key, "Please?"

As if he could say no to him.

Stan let his body roll, curled in on himself as his blurry eyes focused. Richie sat beside him, arms resting on his bent knees, glasses huge and as dorky as his toothy grin. His hair was wild, half brushed and given up on. He wore an orange penguin covered shirt and the denim jacket Stan had found before him. It didn't reach his wrists.

He reached in the pocket. Pulled out a cheezit. And ate it.

Stan giggled, a small laugh trickled past his quivering lower lip. Richie smiled wider, like he was proud to make a smile cover Stan's expression. He slid closer, rubber soles squeaking as he dragged his ass towards Stan.

"I'd offer you one," He said, munching on another, "But I recall you being a prude about pocket snacks,"

"That's gross and you know it," Stan said.

"Maybe so," Richie agreed, wiping his fingers on the knee of his jeans, "Maybe so."

The room was darker, a flickering light cutting above them, changing intensity and color as music played. If Stan stared hard enough he could make out images in it.

“C’mon,” Richie said, voice going soft, “We’re missing it,”

Stan sat up in his chair, old velour seating that was faded in the armrests. Richie twisted to drop into the seat next to him. The armrest dug against both their ribs as Richie put an arm around him to pull him closer.

The movie was nothing but images. Fragments. Colors and shapes that reflected in Richie’s glasses. A soft flute playing a tune that Stan didn’t recognize while five little triangles spun in a sink. Two pieces of yarn pulled across wood. Glitter pouring down to fill the screen.

It was the nicest thing Stan had ever seen.

“I love you.”

“You’ve always had the wildest timing,” Richie giggled. Stan felt warm lips against his cheek. Unmarked. Flushed with nerves, “Hey,”

Stan looked at him. Just Richie and Stan in the empty theatre. Balloons swirling in the lenses of Richie’s frames.

“I love you too.”

“Richie,” Stan began, but Richie just licked his eyebrow. A cheesy grin on his face as he pulled Stan closer.

“We’ll be okay,” Richie promised. A laugh ringing off walls, “You’ll see.”

“I think I’m gonna die here.”

Richie didn’t say anything else, just pulled him closer, soft denim against Stan’s neck. The movie played on.

Rory was excited when she returned. Stan's back hurt from sleeping upright. Tipped against the toilet edge like a body had been there to rely on.

"Do you wanna see?" She asked, glee in her tone.

Stan nodded.

"Yeah," He said, "I wanna see them."

The door slid open, squeaking on hinges. Rory held a small stack of photos, no more than an inch thick, wrapped in a rubber band. Stan swallowed.

She dropped down next to him, flush to his side, and snapped the rubber band off.

"I knew you'd get it," She whispered as she picked out her first choice, "I knew. I told you. I told you."

Stan nodded.

If he was being honest; he doesn't know what was in the photo he was handed. They were black and white. Attempted deep artistry but just held horrible snapshots of fear. Adults. Kids. It didn't matter. He refused to see them. Just stared.

One. Six. Nine. Fifteen.

It was that one he registered. It was his own face. He was curled against the wall, knees to his chin. Pitiful and small and scared. He remembered that moment. The cuts were still fresh. It was the third time she'd sliced him. Moments after he'd thought she'd left him.

He'd been calling for his mother.

Stan crushed the photo in his hand. Rory jerked forward, a yell in her throat.

"Hey!"

He shoved the photo into her mouth. Crushing thick glossed paper into a rigid pact and puncturing it behind her teeth. Her gums bled. Mouth stretched. Tongue flat. Screams silenced.

He'd been crying for his mom.

His fist found her eye without hesitation. A cold rage overtaking him. Over and over. Until bone cracked. His knuckles split. Her eyes bloomed with broken vessels.

He'd begged for his mom.

It took awhile to realize that the inhuman scream reverberating through the halls was Stan himself. A shriek. Unnatural.

Rory's face wasn't recognizable. She'd stopped moving beneath him a long while ago. The filth she'd still been holding haloed around her still, bloody pulp of a head.

Stan looked at his hands, varnished with gore. He screamed again. Again. Again. Curling in on himself, arms shaking and pressed to his chest, he screamed at her. For what she'd done to them. For what she'd done to him.

For what she'd never do again.

He didn't stop until a shadow cut over the two of them. Stan didn't run. Didn't hide. He'd warned Richie, after all - in what little way he could.

He wasn't getting out of here alive.

"Holy fuck, Stan. You're a mess."

Stan blinked.

Crouched in the doorway was one Miss Marsh.

Notes for the Chapter:

okay, spoilers for chapter: rory violates stan's boundaries and fetishizes and describes how she has

previously abused guides. nothing graphically sexual happens - but if it's going to make you uncomfortable please don't read it. i can just fill you in: the bitch dies.

also, lemme just take a moment. actual rory? the poor anon who sent me their name? i'm so sorry. i'm sure you're the coolest thing around but god i just liked your name and wanted it to be a regularly seen character - she wasn't even supposed to be evil originally. but that's what happened. that's on me dude. i'm sorry fosidhfsdiofhdsiofh

let me know if it sucks

21. psykopat

Beverly didn't move from the doorway. Stan stared at her- her fiery hair and exhaustion sunken eyes. She looked shorter, in those soft soled sneakers. That wasn't right. She always wore boots; heavy and loud that were tied sloppily around skinny ankles. Coordinated to match shorts or skirts hems that brushed freckled thighs. But instead Stan found scrubs, pale gray, draped off of her.

"You're not real," Stan croaked, despairing.

Her brow furrowed, jaw working to try and speak as she looked him over. She wasn't real and none of this was because Stan had lost it ages ago and probably already managed to drown himself in the toilet and forgot. God, maybe this was hell. This room. Maybe Rory had killed him the first time, sliced him open; blood -

Stan's knee slipped across the floor. Soft cotton sticky with. With. Stan went to look down.

"Stanley," Beverly rushed, kneeling in front of him. Careful to avoid - oh god - "Stanley, look at me." warm palms cupped his sweaty face. Soft skin soothing to his own scab riddled complexion, "There we go, just look at me. Just me." Her eyes were wide and blue and endless. They flicked back and forth between his own. Thumbs stroked along his cheekbones. She was still talking - her mouth moved slowly - but no words made it to Stan.

Just static. Gray began to creep along the corners of the walls - flooding across his vision. The air dragged from him - the color leaving with it. Copper and blue and everything bleeding until Beverly's skin matched her wrong clothes.

Black and white. Endless black and white. A gloss overtaking Marsh. She looked like she was going to cry. The static deafening. Ready to cry. Curl up and cry.

He'd just wanted his mom.

"Stan, you have to breathe," Beverly's plea carried through the film,

muddled and hazy. One of her hands came to lay flat against his chest. The other pulled him close, still stroking his cheek, until his face was cradled on her shoulder, "Make my hand move," She instructed.

Stan shook his head, panicked huffs dampening her neck, "I ca-an't -" He gasped. A thick bracelet caught his eye, a wide screen across it. "Please don't - I - please sto-op hurting me,"

"Oh, god, Stan" She shushed, dry lips pressed to his cheek, "Just breathe. I'd never hurt you. You know me," Stan shook his head, trying to twist away, but she held fast whispering desperately, "I'm Beverly. You're Stanley. I'm real and you're okay now." Her hand on his chest rubbed back and forth, "Move my hand, c'mon - one, two,"

His inhale was shaky, he didn't make it further before a hiccupping shake took over. But her hand moved as his lungs expanded out. She gently pressed back, not relenting until all his air left, "One... two... three..." She guided, "And out,"

Her hands never left him. Her mouth brushing gently along his temple. It was touch without consequence or cruelty. Soft. Kind. Loved. Stan swallowed the sob in his throat, instead letting out a keen as his hands went to hug her.

Beverly caught his wrists, gently but firm, "Wait, Stan," He wanted to hold her, to know she was real - that this wasn't another twisted delusion born of misplaced prospect. But an echoed drop brought him pause.

Nearly his entire hand was soaked with blood. Thick rivulets along knuckles that were beginning to crust into a flaking garnet along the grooves of his fingertips. A stone plummeted in Stan's chest.

He'd - he'd killed someone. Not a reflex of a power he didn't understand or an accident fueled on terror laced adrenaline. He'd killed her. He'd lured her in and crunched cartilage and bone into pulp.

And Beverly could see it all. Caught him red handed. Literally. He wasn't - he wasn't who they'd come to save.

“Stan...”

He wasn't who they wanted.

“God, what did they do to you?”

What *hadn't* they done? “I'm sorry,” He croaked, “I... she... she -” The words broke in his throat. Beverly let go of his wrists and yanked him into a crushing hug. Enveloping and tender.

“You didn't deserve it,” Beverly swore, “And I wish you'd never had to do what happened - but she had it coming. You have nothing to apologize for, okay?” Stan sagged against her, she kissed his brow. “Okay?”

He nodded. She did too.

Beverly squeezed him once more, then took a deep breath. “C'mon, we gotta get up.” Bev eased them both to their feet; her hands steady on his biceps.

“What...” Stan mumbled. A thousand questions flying. Too fast for him to follow, “What the hell are you wearing?”

She snickered with a tinge of hysteria, seeming to try and center them both, “It's the worst, right?” Stan didn't respond, still trying to settle in himself that Beverly was here and real and her head wasn't going to separate from her shoulders or suddenly fall apart or any other number of things.

“Okay,” She mumbled, “Okay, okay... We can work with this. God,” she looked a bit sick as she looked down, chin whipping back up before her face could go too pale, “New developments; no prob - don't look, Stan. Eyes on me. Okay...”

Walking out of the cell was too jarring to have anything close to catharsis. Tight walls suddenly falling open into endless halls. Too much space around him, like tipping back in a chair, unable to grab anything.

“It's okay, breathe,” Beverly murmured, “We're going to the medical ward. Just hang on a little longer - can you walk?”

Stan nodded numbly. The door clicked shut behind him. Rory's body sealed away.

"They don't do rounds here," She said, under her breath, "Down nine floors. Go left, right..."

"Beverly," Stan cracked, "What's -" He gestured to the hall, the endless hall with too many doors and too many options and not nearly enough time to figure any of them out.

Beverly rubbed his arms, solid and firm. Reassuring. Real. "We're gonna get you cleaned up a little," She said, "And then we're going to get in the elevator. You're going to act like you don't know me. And we're gonna get out."

The first few steps were wobbly, uncertain. Waiting for the extra step he couldn't see that would plummet him back into his cell.

"If I'm hallucinating this," Stan mumbled. Beverly looked to him, hands not leaving his skin, "Then I'm getting really fucking creative."

She wheezed a laugh, shaking her head, "Pretty sure you would've walked into a wall by now."

"That's exactly what a hallucination would say."

They came to a heavy door, metal grating paned through the glass window. Beverly tapped her wristband and a soft click echoed around them.

"How did you get that?"

"Denbrough," She grumbled, "Had access to more, got us clearance. Technically my name is Emma right now."

"Us?" Stan repeated, a lump welling in his chest that felt startlingly like hope.

Beverly smiled and it looked like before. Unadulterated.

"Almost there, Stan," She swore, "We're almost there."

A locker room was tucked away before the main hallway opened out to three different paths. Stan had no sense of direction, no labels adorned anything; just different colored lines painted across the edge of the wall like subway tracks. Beverly seemed sure enough, following the purple mark with a single minded focus.

Stan dropped to a bench while Beverly snagged paper towels to run under the sink. She knelt in front of him, carefully wiping and scrubbing until his skin could peak through once more. Getting beneath his fingernails, along his palms, his wrists -

Stan didn't need to look from her sharp inhale to know what she'd found. Her thumb grazed the thin skin of his wrist. Where raised numbers branded him. Weltd white skin that had long since healed into immutable identification.

51186

She didn't say anything and neither did he. Her thumb pressed down against it, shaking, concealing. Like she could will it away. Could undo what had been done. What had been allowed. But her grip relented and she kept cleaning. Stan took the second pile of dry towels to take the last of the pink water away while Beverly began to dig through lockers and bins.

"The blood on your pants is too noticeable," She explained, "And people know you've been there awhile,"

"How long?" Beverly looked to him, "How long was I in there?"

Her throat clicked, turning away to keep looking through endless gray clothes, "When did she put you there?"

"Right after I called him."

A nod answered him. "Twenty two days."

The implications of that didn't have enough time to choke the air from Stan's lungs before Beverly was back. She pulled him to stand, "Take off the pants," He did, needing to trust her. To be *capable* of trusting her. She wadded up the soiled clothes, jamming them deep in a waste basket, and handed him a fresh pair. They were big,

pooling at his ankles, but he cinched the waist tight and toed on the shoes Beverly set before him.

It was only when they went back towards the hall that Stan saw himself. He genuinely couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his own face. There were no mirrors - not since he'd been ripped from Richie's living room. But he'd been here for months. Months.

Scabs and raw pink skin covered his face. He'd felt the damage Rory had done - but to *see* it - pockets of skin cut away. A sick halo wrapping from temples to chin. They'd scar. Some already had. She'd made sure of it. His skin was practically translucent from being denied sunlight for so long. His shirt hung off of his skinny frame. Hair grown out and grimy.

He looked... he didn't look like Stanley Uris. Not really.

He looked like 51186.

Beverly came to stand beside him. Meeting his eyes in the reflection. They looked like different species. Her cheeks flushed and healthy and alive. His own - he looked like a doll.

In a way, he supposed he was.

"We're getting out of here," Beverly promised, "But I need you to keep it together."

When had he started crying? He didn't even look hydrated enough to spare the water. Keep it together, Stanley. They'd made it this far. He could make it. Buck up.

"Just a little longer," She said, hand coming to his wrist, covering the brand. Stan rubbed at his eyes, scrubbed his face, and nodded. They left the locker room.

It was three flights down the elevator, skyline cut away from view with slabs of granite, leaning against Beverly, that Stan asked, "Who's watching The Falcon right now?"

"Oh my god, Stanley."

The demeanor shifted between the two of them moments before the door slid open. Thirty one. Four floors too soon. The second the floor beneath them lurched to a halt Beverly stepped behind Stan. Her grip didn't waver, but the new position made it appear more controlling than comforting. She squeezed once before the quiet *ding* sirened out and three more people stepped inside. Stan didn't look at them, eyes to the floor. A good guide. Obedient. Invisible.

Beverly was speaking to them, he could hear her in a sort of harmonious wave. No words were clear, the ringing in his ears muffled all comprehension. He didn't know if any were Sentinels but a soft chant began to call from his very marrow.

Don't get caught don't get caught don'tgetcaught

It felt like ages until the doors opened once more and Beverly pushed him forward. The floors were the same, endless smooth planes of stone, but Stan kept his eyes glued to it. Don't look up. Even the rushing sea of gray made the edges of his eyes ache. They were moving so fast - no walls to keep them locked up. There was so much light and sounds other than his own breathing and the hauntings of his psyche. Failures and regrets conjuring demons to keep him company.

Keep it together, Stanley.

There were just as many monsters out here.

A delicate and fierce grip was the only thing tethering him to the ground. Holding fast - unwilling or unable to let him fall into the

autoclave that was left of himself. He wanted to hold her hand.

He twisted his fingers into the fresh shirt hem. Wrinkles creased gouges into tri blend.

Mismatched beeps rang like bells from all around him. Tinkling above the ring in his ears. So much sound. Too much. Beverly shifted her grip, keeping him steady. Every step felt too fast, too wide. They'd hit a wall like this. They'd.

Fuck, keep it *together*.

Stan felt him before he saw him. A gentle tug. A laced twined between his ribs and pulled taut - making it hard to breathe until proximity allowed slack. Necessary to both of their survival.

Stan could see his freckles in the flecks of flooring - could hear the affection and hostility and sacrifice.

The absolute brat that had wormed his way into Stan's heart. Had burrowed down into the ventricles and become the lighthouse Stan could look to.

"Eddie," Stan whispered. Eddie was alive. Eddie was *okay*.

Beverly didn't need to lead him, and Stan hardly restrained himself from taking off down the hall. The medical hall. Stan hadn't been able to feel him in the cell - too far and isolated to have anything but a gaping maw for a diaphragm. A bond drop cutting at his tendons. But he was here. He was here and Stan needed to see him and apologize and save him and maybe kick him for being so fucking stupid and hold him because *Eddie was alive*.

The curtains were drawn over the windowed walls. Stan could hear rattling, metal squeaking. Ragged huffs of air. The growl was unmistakable. Enraged. Beverly's grip tightened, a quick intake of air. He tore himself from the room to look at her. Brows were drawn, eyes wide and flitting like she could see through the scrim.

Eddie almost looked like a corpse, skin tight to bone, hair greasy, eyes sunken. They'd neglected him, locked him away just the same as Stan. He was probably only still here at all because Stan probably

would've felt him in another solitary cell. Would've called for him. Any measure of hope was unacceptable.

But Eddie was fighting, thrashing, trying to shout out with empty punches of air. His eyes were wild and afraid. There was blood smeared along his mouth.

Bill stood at the foot of the bed. His hand was covering his face.

Beverly stepped forward, "What the fuck, Denbrough?"

"He's f-f-f-fucking insa-a-ne," He spit, "A-ani-"

"- *Don't* finish that." Stan spit. Bill froze, words caught in his throat. He looked furious at Stan, to be so suddenly eased without mercy. But Stan couldn't give a shit - running across the room on legs that didn't quite hold him up. Eddie halted, as if struck, and blinked. His eyes seemed to process Stan in stages. A blank look. An empty understanding. And then Stan felt like his ribs would *break* .

He threw himself at Eddie. Any sense of hesitation or worry that would give him pause wasn't something he could even attempt to process. He just needed to *feel* him and be *sure* - just - just -

"Eddie," Stan cracked, burying his face against lank hair, "I thought - I - *Eddie*,"

Eddie clung to him as much as he was able. Severed limb locked around his neck, face crushed to his throat, trying to pull him closer, closer.

Stan felt two heavy taps against his spine. He kissed Eddie's head. Nearly drunk with relief. Beverly and Bill were talking, hushed catch ups on whatever the fuck was happening - but Stan didn't listen. Too focused on feeling the real Eddie near him, his beating heart and filled eyes and attached head.

Bill cleared his throat. "H-h-he's st-t-tuck," Beverly stepped closer, leaning in to see the hang up, "H-h-h-h... wrist," He finally spit out.

Stan twisted away just enough to have a free eye to look down. Eddie's right hand was locked in a thick cuff. There was no slack in

the line, a few bruises spattered across mole strewn skin like he'd knocked his arm against the bed railing trying to shift.

"You don't have a key?" Beverly asked.

"I t-ried to j-j-just look and the f-fff-fucker bit me."

Stan looked up at Bill who had a... sizable gash along his cheek. Scan worn skin pulled and ripped from what must've been Eddie's canines.

"What did you expect?" Stan mumbled, freeing one hand from Eddie to fiddle with the cuff, "You probably just came in and got in his face."

"That" Bill pointed, "*B-bit* me,"

"He's a person," Stan hissed.

"Then a-act like one!"

"Enough!" Beverly spit. Bill walked away from them, grabbing a box of tissues and blotting at his face. "We need to get going. Now. Are there - I don't - scissors? Can we cut him free?"

"It's metal," Stan said, fingers finding cruel steel wrapped beneath the thin sherpa coating. Eddie's skin was raw and red along the edges.

"Okay," Beverly mumbled, "I'll go to the office and get the key -"

"- They'll know y-y-you're n-not supp-posed to be there."

"So you can go -"

"- Why would I need him?" Bill asked, voice flat, "H-he isn't even let up t-t-to shit. It's a punishment."

Eddie's face burned hot, molars grinding against Stan's neck. Stan tugged him closer - impossibly closer - "We'll figure it out," Stan mumbled, flushed on the bond rushing between them, "Eddie -"

“We came here f-f-f-for Stan.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Stan looked to Beverly. Fierce, powerful, uncompromising Marsh. Her eyes pooled with fury, almost blinding as it flecked off of cerulean.

But she wasn't speaking.

“What?” Bill didn't look at him. He just stared at Beverly. Blood flicking off lashes as he blinked.

“H-h-he's the p-p-priority . The p-pr-project. Y-you saw the file. Th-th,” He pointed at Eddie, “Th-that one isn't listed. He's exp-pendable. They've l-l-left him to shit himself and rot j-just to punish S-S-Stanley.”

“Bill,” Beverly warned. But Bill was already moving, already heading to the door.

“He's got a h-heart monitor oh him! Alarms w-w-will go off the second we move him,” Bill's look was implacable. “W-w-we've already wasted t-t-too much time. You took too long to g-get him down here.”

“No,” Stan begged, “No we're not. I'm not leaving without him.”

Eddie didn't even seem to be breathing anymore.

“D-didn't you say you'd die here?” Bill cut, “You told me to get you out. I'm doing that.”

“It's not -”

“- It's either you get out now or they find Rory and you never leave that box.”

Stan swallowed. His spit stuck in this larynx. Suffocating. The box. Not the box. He'd die. He'd die in there.

“Robert would never let you out,” Bill said, voice soft. Trying to get him to understand. To accept. Eddie wasn't moving. “He'd starve you and torture you. He'd break you until you're nothing and get exactly

what he wants from whatever is left. You wouldn't be alive anymore. And he'd never let you die."

Stan was choking. The room was too loud. Too much. Too much.

"Stan."

Beverly looked between them, horrified but - but - what could they do? Words kept coming half formed, unable to see an opportunity. She covered her mouth, shaking breaths cutting in the silence.

"We need to go."

"What are you doing?"

Eddie was staring with alarming intensity at Stan - which, considering how Eddie tended to stare; it was *alarming* .

"Are you okay?"

YOU'RE MAKING THIS DIFFICULT,

The message had been written out of nowhere, no context with following a laughter filled EAT SHIT and earlier TURKEY when asked what he was eating. The lull of silence he been long, comfortable as the two of them ate. Eddie only got a little annoyed about crumbs in his bed since neither of them were keen to eat in the public area or on the floor.

"I..." Stan blinked, sandwich halfway to his mouth. He'd taken to bringing his food to Eddie's room. He'd been proven trustworthy enough to let the door stay open and any offering to be away from Patrick was a'okay with him. "Sorry?"

Eddie smacked his pen against the words wildly, seven whaps against paper with eyebrows that were about to come off his damn forehead.

Then he tapped the page twice with admittedly much more restraint.

“... Are we learning morse code?” Stan asked, earning a kick from Eddie.

Then a blush began to take over Eddie’s cheeks, splatters of freckles hiding in the rosy flush. Stan wasn’t... this was new. The bed dipped between them as Eddie slid closer. He jammed his way between Stan’s stretched legs until he could haphazardly toss his own on either side of Stan’s hips. Heads dipped low, creating a huddle without thinking about it, a fragile little ball of privacy between them. Eddie put the book to his chest, words out, and tapped again. Slowly.

YOU'RE MAKING THIS DIFFICULT,
YOU'RE MAKING THIS DIFFICULT,
YOU'RE MAKING THIS DIFFICULT,
YOU'RE MAKING THIS DIFFICULT,
YOU'RE MAKING THIS DIFFICULT,
YOU'RE MAKING THIS DIFFICULT,
YOU'RE MAKING THIS DIFFICULT,

He tapped twice beside the comma.

“Stanley...”

Eddie’s face grew hotter. Tapped twice again. And nodded.

“Stan - ley.”

The smile that pulled across Stan’s cheeks ached. Trembling as a sting built behind his eyes. Eddie’s expression mirrored a warped version of his own. Nervous, mouth pinched at one side, waiting.

“That’s,” Stan blinked, biting his lip as a warm heat swelled in his chest. If he was being careless it’d almost feel like love, “The *cutest* thing you’ve ever done.”

The book smacking into his face wasn’t a shock, nor was Eddie shoving him with a red hot flush across his cheeks and indignant rage in his eyes. Stan laughed, a foreign bubble in his throat that startled them both.

“Oh my god, are we *friends*?” He teases until Eddie jabbed the pen in his side, tickling him even as he laughed, “Do you *like* me?”

He pulled Eddie close, unbothered by the weird twist of their legs or the guards that could come in or anything because, because,

Stan - ley.

“Eddie,” He whispered, keeping his face close and voice hushed, but swearing it. “Eddie. Eddie.”

He deserved to hear his own name. He deserved to have it. He deserved whatever little offering Stan could give him.

Stan felt his cheek twist as Eddie pinched it. Then two taps. Like a heartbeat.

Stan - ley.

“Eddie,”

Stan - ley.

“Eddie,” He squeezed him tighter, one last hug before insecurity and survival would kick in again and make them separate.

“Stan.”

Stan looked at Eddie. Eddie who was peeling himself from Stan’s grip with an ashen look on his face. Who carried the same expression he’d had when Stan was strangling the life out of him. Resigned. Terrified and resigned.

Waiting for his death.

“No,” Stan croaked, “No, *no* -”

“- For God’s sake,” Bill hissed, stepping close and going for Stan’s waist.

stop

Bill jarred, rage in his eyes at the command. Eddie looked alarmed, confused, and tried to back up. To make Stan go. Go without him.

Stan turned to Eddie. He pried Eddie’s mouth open and shoved his forearm between his teeth. Eddie, for once, was the one to look alarmed. Stan could almost laugh. Instead he brought their heads together, a small huddle between them, and brought his free hand to Eddie’s own cuffed one.

trust me and relax

Stan watched for the ease to take hold. For the softening in the bags under Eddie’s eyes. He gripped Eddie’s thumb and *yanked* .

A sickening pop rang out as Eddie bit down onto Stan’s arm. He wouldn’t, couldn’t, shriek; but Stan felt the offer could help at least a little. The heart monitor barely blipped. Eddie’s pulse didn’t have the luxury to change under Stan’s sway.

“It’s okay,” Stan hushed as he reached for his wrist, “Bev, help me - it’s okay,”

Beverly shot up beside them and gripped the edges of the cuff. Stan took a deep breath with Eddie, who had scrunched his eyes shut, tears welling between trembling lashes.

“On three,” Stan said, “One, two -”

relax

He yanked Eddie’s arm. It caught on the cuff, dislocated thumb not quite slipping out, and he yanked again as Eddie drew blood. Beverly didn’t let up either. Once more. Again. Aga -

Eddie’s hand came loose. It shot to his chest, cradled with an already purpling thumb. Blue hue tinting down to his wrist to bleed against raw pink skin. He’d broken it, accidentally. Shoved beyond

dislocation.

“I’m sorry,” Stan pleaded as Eddie’s jaw unlocked from his arm. Stan tried to reach for the injured hand. Eddie didn’t let him, but also didn’t move away. Teeth chattering as he curled against Stan.

Beverly quietly grasped it instead, startling both of them, and popped the thumb back into place. Eddie wheezed violently, a shudder rolling through him, and dropped against the bed.

“Okay,” Beverly gasped, “Okay. We need to keep going.”

Bill was in the doorway, having retreated back at the command. He looked mad. Spiteful almost. Maybe because Stan wouldn’t leave Eddie behind. Because he risked himself for the other boy.

Maybe because he knew Stan wouldn’t do it for him. Stan knew he wouldn’t either. Not anymore.

Stan slid off the bed, helping Eddie try to find his footing for the first time in three weeks. He tipped violently to the left, and fell back to the bed. Bill stepped forward, mouth open, but stopped at the look from Stan. Beverly slipped an arm under Eddie’s arm holding just above his wrist carefully, leaving the injured side for Stan.

The two of them hauled him up, letting his next to nothing weight lean on them. Stan looked to Bill, one hand on the wires hooked to Eddie.

“Where do we go?”

The hallway was mercifully clear for how slow they were moving. The machines whirled violently, unsynchronized beeps and pings playing out a chaotic melody of heart and lung failure.

No one even opened the staff door until they were already turning the hall.

Stan held Eddie tighter. They’d really just let him die.

But the alarms rang eventually. An empty bed was more cause for concern than a dead useless guide. Beverly shoved the two of them in

a storage closet as footfalls began flying towards them. She waited, looking to talk to Bill with concern through the fogged glass door, before pulling them both back out to keep going.

The doorway Bill opened wasn't the grand elevator that Eddie and Stan had tried - but a small plain door. It wasn't even labelled. The four of them slipped inside to find another hallway. Flat, blank, even dusty. An employee hallway. Beverly grabbed anything not nailed down to make a barricade. Bill took off his belt to loop the door handle shut.

"W-w-we're almost t-there," Bill whispered, keeping the lead as they trailed behind him. Eddie was glaring daggers at him. Stan couldn't blame him.

They'd almost left him. They'd been so close.

"I told you," Stan whispered, not bothering to care about how Bill twitched with Sentinel hearing, "Stick with me, kid."

Eddie snorted, a crooked smile scrunched on his face. He couldn't tap, not with the arm on Stan, but at this point it wasn't even necessary.

An elevator sat at the end of the hall. Plain flat metal. It didn't even have an intricate touch screen, just two lights for arrows going up or down.

Beverly swiped for it, cutting past Bill before he could get his wrist close enough.

"You're higher up," She explained, "I'm just a low level. You wouldn't use these normally." Bill had the audacity to wait a moment before looking impressed. But he nodded, and waited.

The whirl of the elevator shaft echoed around them. And Stan felt Eddie nearly collapse. It was moving. It was moving for them. They were getting the *fuck* out of here.

The doors slide open like salvation. A plain box of linoleum flooring and plain metal walls bringing Stan to tears. Fluorescent lights welcomed them. Beverly stepped forward first, putting an arm in the

doorway as if they'd ever let it shut them out now. She turned back to them, a grin blinding. Other hand extended. Eyes flicked for a moment just over Stan's approaching head.

Her expression dropped just as Bill did.

sleep , stanley .

A horrible chill ran over Stan, a veil made seemingly of ice prickling against his nerves and drowning his senses until only a haze of command was left. This - no - this -

NO

The shock to his system was violent, a churning pull in his center as he threw the suggestion out of himself. Like he'd torn his stomach open and let the command flay out across the floor.

"Well... better late than never, I guess."

A laugh echoed behind him. But it wasn't Robert.

Stan turned, holding a gasping Eddie close to stare at the easy posture of Patrick Hockstetter.

He looked the same as when Stan had nearly killed him. Smile stretched doughy across pallid skin. Shoulders dropped down and arms dangling. There were only two differences.

His eyes had rolled back, empty whites staring back, and he had a knife.

The laugh rang out again as Patrick twisted the knife between his fingers. The blade caught skin a few times. Blood sluiced across his hand and blade. He didn't even seem to notice.

"Did you really think," He laughed, "That you were leaving, kiddo?"

"Patrick," Stan warned, backing to the doorway.

"There's more going on here than your little buddies. There's big things. You didn't follow the rules. So now I get to kill your friends."

"Killing is against the rules, Patrick," Stan tried, but Patrick just laughed again.

"Not for me. Not right now. Mr. Gray is on the winning team."

His eyes seemed unseeing, but he approached with confidence. A horrible feeling clicked.

"Robert... where are you?"

"Hmm," Patrick tapped the knife to his chin in mock thought, smearing gore across days old stubble, cutting his lip so severely teeth seemed to poke past, "Nice try, Stanley. Back up has been alerted of your location. He'll see you soon. But for now,"

Stan recoiled as Patrick ran at them, pulling Eddie towards the wall with him. He brought his leg up to swing, take out a knee, but Patrick went right past. Beverly's shriek was ear splitting as the knife sank into her arm. Stan swung to her, leaving Eddie to the wall. Her arm was up, forearm split as she'd barely taken the blow. The tip of the knife was inches from her chest. He'd almost -

"Get off!" Stan yelled, grabbing Patrick.

get off getoff g

Patrick twisted in his grip, pulling the knife out with him. Beverly collapsed back against the wall, gasping, trying to staunch blood with her shirt. Patrick's blood soaked hand covered Stan's face, smearing Beverly's blood over his nose and forehead.

"You haven't been paying attention, Stanley." Stan's teeth rattled as his head smacked into the floor. Patrick grabbed him by the curls, dragging him away from his friends.

"Bill!" He called, desperate as the boy seemed to begin to come around. He looked up, scar and blood strewn face meeting his with a smile. His eyes were white. "Fuck, *fuck*, "

Bill came slowly to his feet, hand reaching for Stanley's shirt and pulling him along. Stan's lower back squeaked across the floor as skin pulled and caught on the tiles. He dug his nails into Patrick and Bill's

grips, but they seemed either immune or simply unaware of the grooves he dug.

Let go letgoletgGOLETGO

The grip on his shirt slackened, Stan's fingers locked around Bill's wrist. Bill blinked, legs faltering, and that was enough, that could be enough.

"Bill!" He yelled, and Bill snapped to awareness. His grip shifted and he yanked Stan back towards himself. The pull against his scalp was agony, but with the added help Stan was able to pry Patrick away and off of himself.

A blur flew past them both as Beverly throttled into the guide. She went for the knife first, knocking it away and trying to choke him out.

"Beverly!" Stan shouted, trying to right himself, to help -

"Get Eddie! He's -" Patrick laughed, delighted, and Beverly shouted as they grappled, "Get him!"

Stan didn't wait, and took off back towards where the boy was laying. Eddie was going blue, his own hand coming around his throat, wringing his own neck. His eyes flew wildly, aware of the ease but unable to stop it.

"Hang on," Stan begged, but Eddie's eyes flew wider and his mouth opened as if to shout. A weight slammed into Stan's back. Taking him to the floor feet from the other boy. His hand shot out, Patrick be damned, but his fingers were just shy of reaching him.

A three fingered hand smacked down beside his face. And Stan was flipped to see a white eyed Bill staring up at him. Oh god. He'd just stopped it, a punch cracked down into his eye. White spots blinding him as his mind tried to catch up. The veil was falling again. The punches rained down. Trying to ensnare him. To catch him.

Stan reached a hand up, half catching the falling fist, his own hand crunched against what was definitely bruise mottled skin. But he hung on.

Bill stop stop stopstopstop

The boy took longer to come back, stan horrified as his irises slowly rolled back into sight. He barely began to back away before Stan threw his free hand to hold his wrist.

Grip tight he slid across the floor to Eddie. His forehead nearly whacked into Eddie's own, "Eddie, stop," He said, begged, commanded.

Breathe eddie breathe

The gasp was horrible, wet and coughing. But breathe Eddie did. Stan gasped with him, relief heavy in his bones and he tugged him closer.

A shout echoed down the hall. Beverly. Fuck.

Stan stood slowly, one hand tight on Bill.

"S-s-she's immune to the s-s-sway," Bill offered, "I-I-If we can get her to j-j-just run back we can make it."

"We need to help her. And if Robert is alive then we're never going to really be safe. Don't let go of me. He gets you if I don't hang on," Bill didn't question it. Adjusting to keep a hand locked on Stan's forearm. They both pulled Eddie to stand, but the boy was like deadweight.

Stan saw the look that came across Bill's face, the drawn darkness that came over his brow. How he was looking at Eddie.

"I'm carrying him," Stan said, "I can carry him,"

"You can b-barely w-w-walk -"

"- We're not leaving him." Stan snapped, "You're not making me leave him."

Bill didn't help him get Eddie up, but the two of them figured it out quick enough. The struggles down the hall bounced down to them - horrible echoes of a fight they needed to stop. But Stan wasn't leaving Eddie.

The smaller boy locked his legs around Stan's waist, arms wrapped tight around his neck as he drew ragged breaths, pressing his forehead to the crown of Stan's curls, pushing them both forward. Stan leaned against Bill, but the latter didn't comment. Couldn't. He needed Stan just as much as Eddie did.

The contact was enough to keep them both with Stan, but a sweat was already breaking on his brow. A constant tug between two sources, trying to keep them here when the sway of Mr. Gray was clearly trying to smother them both.

Bill stopped them and Stan tried to find the lung capacity to shout, but saw him bend down to grab the discarded knife. Droplets of blood led the way, a macabre trail of breadcrumbs.

"Come here, Stanley," Patrick called. A sharp shriek followed. A sick echo. Stan pulled them faster, "Come join us."

Patrick's face had been torn further, blood caked beneath Beverly's nails. His cheek was split, teeth gleaming pink behind shredded skin that left Stan almost sure this was another twisted hallucination. The vice on Beverly's hair pulled another cry from her.

"Now," Patrick's voice was garbled, blood filling on his tongue. He might've even been choking on it, "Let's have ourselves a deal."

Eddie held him tighter. Stan could feel his rage, his push to deny it, but Stan mumbled out a soft, "What kind of deal?"

"You're about out of time, kiddo. Security will get through your little barricade in a minute and your friends will be gunned down or taken to be *asked* about where they were thinking you could go. But," He hugged Beverly closer, a drop fell from his chin to bleed into her copper curls, "We could do it a little differently. You come over here. Let them go. And let him in; they'll all live."

"Stan -" Beverly tried, but a sharp punch to her solar plexus knocked all her air away.

"- Shush. You come over here. Float back along like you're supposed to. Eddie and Bevvie will get to live."

Stan froze. There was no grip on his wrist.

“... Bill?”

No white eyes met his own, but a deep, calm blue.

“G-g-georgie is a g-guide. If y-you're here they don't need him, he can't,” He looked away, “He'd never make it here.”

“ *Bill* ,” Stan pleaded. But all he got was his back. Walking slowly to the side of Patrick. Beverly let out a scream, unbridled rage.

“You *fucker* !” She yelled, “You - you - we *trusted you!*”

“I'm sorry.” He handed the knife to Patrick. The metal kissed the edge of Beverly's throat.

“Decision time, roomie.”

Stan wrapped his hands around Eddie's arms, they were both shaking. Eddie's arms were so thin. He was so small.

“I don't want to put him down.”

“That's not -”

“- I won't fight you.” Stan whispered, “Just don't make me put him down. You know he can't fight you.”

Patrick shrugged, “Alright, carry the cripple.” He gestured a ‘come hither’ motion with the knife that knicked Beverly's throat. Stan stepped closer.

D o n't

Eddie's plea did nothing. Stan felt is cloying at him, desperate -

ple a sE

Loving.

pleas e s ttto p

But it didn't matter. Not now. It ...

Patrick smiled at him.

It...

A figure walked forward. Heels clicking.

It would be okay.

Robert emerging from the shadows felt nearly unnatural. How silent he could be. How shiny his teeth were, how they gleamed as pearly as his soft gray three piece suit. The red hair and red lips stretched to smile as he tugged off pristine gloves one finger at a time. He stepped around Patrick, a playful bounce in his gait, to stop before Stan.

"Stanley Uris," He whispered, voice high, reedy, cruel, "It's time."

It felt a little like bravery when he didn't cower from the hands encroaching his peripherals. Maybe it was Eddie against his back or the blind hope that he was worth enough to keep the word that Richie and Beverly and his friends would be safe. That he was enough to not go after a couple of losers trying to survive.

Robert's grip found Stan's face like hooks. A horrible rush feel through him. A wave. Rising beneath his very being and cloying up as the veil fell down over his eyes. The muscles in his corneas strained as they tipped deeper and deeper into red darkness. There was nothing.

Nothing at all.

Time to float .

Stanley stood alone in a space that had no floor or walls. He was naked, though the touch to his own body didn't even feel like skin. It

was more of a sense. An image. An outline.

He walked forward but nothing around him changed. Forward. Forward. Back. Nothing. Even his feet when he jumped never landed back on anything. He simply kept being where he was - unmoving and unable.

There was a warmth around him, though it had no source. A pull in his chest to something... something orange? Maybe? Stan wasn't sure he remembered what orange was, but this seemed right.

A warm orange on his back. Bright and present and loud and silent.

There were others too. Green and blue and pink in a haze that washed around. They weren't connected like the orange, more floating in a distance, but they were still around him - though he couldn't see anything since there was nothing to see or touch or hear.

But one feeling stood stronger than the orange or the haze or even nothing. It felt brighter, alive, a pulse beating.

Stan tried to find it, to locate and connect a vicinity to the feeling. But. Where he turned. Wherever. It was always gone again. Unseeing. Unfocused. But so small it had pinpointed down beyond.

An ink began to drip from between the seams of air around him. Filling and blotting the colors and the spaces and the outlines. A cold began to settle in, unwelcome. The feelings - the - what -

There had been nothing. There was nothing. Stan and the black. The endless. The black. He stood. He didn't stand since there was nothing to stand on he just

Stan floated.

Stan reached for himself. For his outline. For the gaps in the middle.

A spark shot out. Brilliant and *yellow* and right there it had been right there - where -

He reached again. Right where a stomach would be. Again. Like a shot.

It was inside. The yellow was inside *him* beyond outside influence or sway or even connection. It had become part of him. Connected. Cohesive.

Richie.

The spark shot forward again. Richie. RichierRichieric *hierichie* .

How could he forget Richie?

Richie and Eddie and Beverly and Mike and Ben and and

The ink was suffocating, curling around his outline and weighing him down. Down into nothing. Into the void.

No.

No.

“No.”

But the drip drip drip of ink didn't stop. Didn't listen. Just filled. Filled and blotted out. Stan reached for the spark. For the Richie and the Eddie and the Mike he knew were supposed to be there -

A flicker came. Bubbled from beneath the black. Popped out and sizzled.

What had

What

Stan floated.

Ink cooled against him, solidified. Stagnated. Numbed.

He blinked. He

He

w

h o

A rush of heat, of orange, punched him - stan, *Stanley* - so hard he choked. He choked on the ink in his lungs and the sludge in his veins. It boiled against him. Enraged. Eddie.

E d d i e

Stan's eyes stung and blood splattered into them. Blinding him as his retinas flooded with light and ached from curling into his skull. He coughed, alarmed, swaying, terrified - Robert -

Robert had a hand in his skull.

Eddie's arm had shot out, broken thumb purpled and wedged into his socket - holy *shit* - as he gripped and pulled at the man's eye. Stan couldn't see his fingers.

He fell back, exhaustion and shock crippling him as he and Eddie tipped. Robert was falling backwards like he'd been punched. Like their break in connection and assaulted him.

Gravity pulled them both. Stan heard a *pop* and closed his eyes. The scream was blood curdling.

Patrick seemed stunned, but not bothered. The knife he'd held to Beverly was hanging easy in his hands. Beverly crawled to the collapsed forms of Stan and Eddie. Stan pulled her close, checking her for any more injuries, checking to be sure - *sure* - this was real.

"Wait," Bill called above them, stepping forward.

Patrick turned. The knife disappeared into Bill's stomach. Beverly screamed.

"You broke the rules," Patrick said, removing the knife to stab again. Bill collapsed, shock ashen on his face.

"I-I-I-I-"

"Mr. Gray is a guide who didn't alert authorities on the location of 51186," Patrick hummed, "And you're harboring a rogue; Georgie," He let the knife fall out and away, "You can't break rules."

Robert was screeching, feet sliding in his own blood beneath him as he towered above the three on the floor, "You... *you*..." Beverly kicked brutally out. His knee cracked.

It was Eddie that sat up. Eddie that didn't let go of Stan, but shook with effort at - at -

Stan saw how Robert's eye twisted in his head, rolling around senselessly. How he began to choke. Sputtering. Pitiful.

Stan didn't stop him. Eddie gasped once Robert stopped moving all together. A wet plop hit the floor beside them. Beverly kicked it away.

Patrick watched them all, amused, interested. He looked to Stan, eyes flat.

"Did you cry when they cut you open?"

His head cracked when he fell. Blood pooling from where he landed on the knife.

Beverly got up first, knees buckling as she pulled Stan and then Eddie

up. The three weren't stable, far from it, but they were standing. They were standing and the elevator was... Richie was...

"W-w-w-wwait,"

Only Stan paused. Beverly and Eddie stumbling as they tried to keep walking. Stan looked at Bill. Big Bill Denbrough with his blood soaked shirt and tear streaked face.

"G-G-G-Ge-Georgie d-doesn't d-d-d-deserve thi-i-i-is," He coughed, "I j-j-j-j-just w-w-wanted to see him ag-g-gain. Pl-l-le- ee -ease, S-s-t-t-tan-ny."

For the second time in his life; Stanley left Bill Denbrough to die.

The elevator played music. A trill little beat with bongos that felt so out of place that Beverly broke down sobbing. Eddie shimmied a bit between them.

There was a car ten yards from the elevator doors. Tucked between pallets and loading docks and angled so awkwardly that it must be avoiding cameras. Beverly stuck her hand in the doorway and looked at her watch.

"Wait," She mumbled, voice distant, "Fourteen more seconds. Then run."

She counted quietly. The three hobbled as fast as they could. Halfway across the doors opened.

Richie stood, eyes wide, and Stan nearly collapsed. Mike and Ben followed the boy to catch them, hauling them to the blindspot before whatever window of opportunity closed.

“Hey,” Richie mumbled, eyes wide, “So, uh, what’s up?”

22. лёгkasць

“This is bullshit.”

Mike sighed, but his stuttering rhythms against leather cushions gave away his nerves. Richie was fucking nervous. There wasn't any goddamn way he was going to even attempt to hide that.

“She's in there by herself -”

“- Bill is -”

“- A *bitch*,” Richie cut in, ignoring Mike's endless attempts to soothe him. Ben was by his feet. The three of them were a tight squeeze in the front row's meager attempt at legroom. The kid was in the back, practically glued to the trunk door stay away from Ben and himself. Normally Richie would try for a smile, maybe a joke to make kids not see him as tweeky so much as goofy, but the clog in his throat kept festering back up - threatening to eat him alive.

“We could help them,” He tried, but Mike was already shaking his head, “*Mike*, c'mon, me and Ben? Tough ol' brutes? Really show them some stereotypical behavior.”

Ben snorted beside him, not even trying to look apologetic at Richie's glare.

“Rich, you're built like Gumby,” He scratched his beard as the glovebox door seemed so fuckin' interesting to him, “I'm pretty sure you've got the bone density of uncooked pasta.”

“That is...” Richie sputtered, “You're not the *rude* one, Hanscom. This -”

“- Richie.” Mike pressed. Voice firm. Both Sentinels looked to him, “Just... sit. Be quiet. Bev's been gone for ten minutes. It's okay.”

The insult was bitten back between clenched molars. But Richie made sure to twist just enough that Mike got a kick in the hip for his troubles. The van was - Richie didn't even remember where it came from. But it had three rows of seats and was as packed as they could

make it and still fit eight people. Food and tents and probably a concerning amount of knives were methodically rolled into backpacks. One for each of them. Mike and Ben would carry two if Stan and Eddie couldn't -

They'd be able to. Stan would insist he carry his own load. Hah. Load.

Richie kicked Mike again.

He knew, in whatever pathetic area of his brain was allowing reason, that he couldn't go inside. This place was methodically designed to corner and contain him just as much as Stan. He'd be a sore thumb in there, no grace to blend like Bev - and Ben was in the same boat. He knew that, he did - Ben was suffering just as much as him. They weren't even the getaway drivers - Beverly had laughed and said that they'd both be sitting ducks the second she got the two boys out. Richie had been rightfully offended, c'mon, he was gonna be fine. He was part of a treasonous counter measures to release two prisoners of the state from arguably one of the most secure buildings in the world. He was Mission Impossible. He wasn't going to clam up.

But the minutes ticked on and Beverly and Bitch-Bill, Mike had insisted they didn't need codenames but - c'mon, hadn't rounded the corner yet. No alarms were blaring, that had to - that had to be good, right? They were just taking a little longer. Sneaking around. Stealth. No one knew.

Or someone already got them. No need for alarms when a threat was neutralized.

Richie's knee began to shake, a wobble that kept cresting into heavier trembles until his teeth were nearly clicking with each jostle. His head tipped back as much as he could manage tucked down in the foot space of the van, staring up at a blank concrete ceiling. Stan was up there, alone, and he needed to *move*, he needed to do something. But the ceiling offered nothing. Beverly should've been back... fourteen minutes ago. Fifteen. Sixteen.

A stone started to press down on him. A slab, invisible and unavoidable, crushing down in horrible fractions until the air rushed

out of cracking lungs.

Fuck, it hadn't been this bad in weeks. A clawing gap rattling in his ribcage, demanding space between pressed flat veins until he was sure it would swallow him whole. He was so tired. He was so fucking tired and there was no release from it. A quiet whine left him, despite his best intentions. Mike and Ben had both shot up, still hidden but staring in open concern at the sweat that was beading across his face.

Bond drop. His rage had kept him out of it before. Too fueled with raw hatred to do anything but keep going or break. Now a horribly familiar claw found his throat, choking him.

Get it together, Tozier. Mission Impossible. C'mon.

His teeth clacked as he dug his palms into his eyes, grinding until bright spots bloomed against red-black nothingness. Hands found his wrists, pulling them away from mashing his skull to dust. But he needed this to stop, he needed to get a grasp on anything or he was either gonna burst into tears or smash his head against the door until sleep would grant him mercy -

"Richie," Ben pleaded, "Look at me,"

Richie shook his head, humiliation and grief swirling a toxic sludge through him. Beverly still wasn't back. Twenty four minutes. Stan wasn't back - wasn't *coming* back something was wrong -

A hand pressed over his eyes. His skin squeaking against leather upholstery as he was manhandled back to chest with Ben's hulking figure.

"Christ, you're huge," Richie gasped, reedy laugh trying to diffuse whatever weight had settled between the three men and weird kid in the trunk, "I mean," He smacked a hand to Ben's rock solid - *christ* - abdomen, "Step on me -"

"- Stop talking." Mike hushed. Two hands found his knees, rubbing down to his ankles and back up. The touch was grounding, embarrassingly so, even if it didn't carry the weight that Stan's could.

Ben's hand still covered Richie's eyes, knocking his glasses askew to cup warm heat over thin skin, "I get it," He offered, voice nearly inaudible, "I do. I swear. They'll be back soon."

"How did Stan get all these hot friends?" Richie gasped, chuckle watery and clogged, but he could *feel* the way Ben blushed at the comment.

"We're your friends too, Rich," Mike rubbed his knee, "You're just so much more annoying."

The weight didn't disappear. Not completely. But the hands pressing firmly to him eased it - if only just a bit. It didn't make sense, not at first. They weren't guides, fuck, Hanscom was a Sentinel too. But their touch was just - grounding. Richie hadn't -

Richie hadn't held or been held since Stan. And before Stan... just quick fucks in hotels and dressing rooms. Blowjob and dirty words and anything to make him feel like he wasn't going to buzz right out of his skin.

But with Stan, and with these complete - god, *losers*; the lot of them - there was just. It's like he'd been starved. Starved of touch. Touch starved.

One of his writers had done a sketch about that once. With Kinky Briefcase. It didn't feel very funny anymore.

The three stayed like that as the clock ticked on - mocking them with insecurity. They aren't back yet. It's been too long, Tozier. He's dead. He's gone.

Ben pressed harder. Richie held his wrist.

"This," His throat clicked, "Is pretty gay."

Ben laugh shook the three of them. Huge, heavy chuckles coming from deep in his gut. Mike's laugh was a snicker, softer - gentler. Richie began to cackle at this idiocy of this. At this *stupid* plan and these *nutjobs* and how they all were just - ready to die for Stan and Eddie. Or worse. And Richie? Richie's pretty sure he'd do the same. His laugh cracked and echoed in the van. Jagged and not quite

whole. It suited him. Even a soft giggle trailed from the trunk, the hidden kid joining in on the fun. And the fun's just fuckin' begun.

Twenty seven minutes.

The clang of the loading door opening made Richie shoot up out of Ben's grip. Knocking his glasses back into place, to see, to be *sure* he - he -

Stanley stood just ten yards away.

Mike's hand shot for Richie's before he even realized he was struggling with the car door, "Not yet. Wait," Mike's eyes were on the three. Three. No Bill.

Beverly was looking at her watch. The seconds dragged cruelly between them. The second her foot flung forward Mike said, "Now."

All of them clambered out of the van, darting across echoing concrete to grab the mirrored trio. Ben and Mike went for Beverly and the hobbit - who looked half dead - while Richie could only see Stan.

Maybe it was smart he hadn't gone with her.

But he had a job. A specific job. And dammit, he wasn't going to fuck them up *now*. So his hands snagged the cotton of Stan's shirt and hauled him back to the safety of the blindspot.

They stared at each other. Richie's vision tunnelling around him. Not even capable of processing anything less important than Stanley.

"Hey," He croaked, a lump in his throat.

Hey, it's gonna be okay.

Hey, I'm so sorry.

Hey, I love you.

"So, uh, what's up?"

Stan smiled at him. It looked so fragile. So unpracticed. His eyes pooled and glittered. And threw himself into Richie.

The moment that Richie felt Stan just - *collapse* - against him, a numbing shockwave bellows through his bones. A warmth returning to his marrow and heating him from within - as if, for the first time in months, his blood remembered to pump. Blood sprinkled his tee shirt, sticking cotton between trembling walls of skin.

What an opener, Tozier - *what's up* - a real dreamboat. But Stan has smiled, *smiled* at *him*. And everything might be okay. Maybe. At least for as long as his fingers could knot into the back of Stan's shirt. Grip unyielding, half sure none of this was real.

He was afraid, so fucking afraid, and even when Mike began to hustle them to the car door Richie wouldn't let Stan go. Not again. Not ever again.

Beverly held Eddie, *that* was Eddie - christ, what a midget, close as they moved to the open doors. Blood was flowing out of her shoulder at an alarming rate -

"Did someone *stab* you?"

"Not important," She huffed, looking at Stan, "He's - he doesn't think this is real. I don't think he gets what's going on,"

"Well, at least I'm just as annoying as ever," Stan gasped a laugh against him. Whistled and hysterical - but there. Good. Goodgoodgood. Get some laughs in. Maybe some air too.

Beverly rolled her eyes, face easy despite the cold sweat growing across her brow. "Our one constant."

They both flopped into the van, Richie distantly aware that Stan the man was hyperventilating against his collarbone. Someone shoved them deeper into the backseat, pushed down to the floor between benches. That was okay. Stan needed to breathe. Richie could do that. He could do that.

"Stanley," He croaked, and a shudder wracked through Stan above him, "Breathe, babe. Just -"

The air whistled between his teeth. Richie could *feel* how tightly his eyes were scrunched against him. His hands wouldn't settle, brushing

across Richie's hair and face and chest and god - that was a lot. What little excuse for breathing he managed was like a turbine. Was it always this loud?

Richie blinked, wincing at how sunlight caught Stan's curls in symphonic twirls of gold. Blinding. God - his *hair* was loud -

"Stanley!" Someone above them snapped, Richie shouted abruptly at the clap that resonated in his ears, "You're hurting Richie."

"No-" Richie tried to assure, but it came out like a keen. His throat felt clogged. Overused. Strangling.

Stan opened his eyes, horribly red with popped blood vessel swirling scarlet against rich horribly sad brown.

"Richie..." He'd never heard his name like that before. Didn't think it ever could've been close to the gasp that Stan whispered against pebbled skin. Like he was a prayer - something even *worth* praying for.

"Hey, babe," Richie mumbled, voice only as loud as his ears could take. He rubbed his hands heavily along Stan's side. Grounding him. Grounding them both. "Can you maybe start breathing?"

The hands reached for his face, scared to touch. To pass right through. To find himself still in whatever hell he'd just been freed from, "Rich-"

"Still me," Richie swore. He looked up at Beverly, who looked about ready to cry. The angle wasn't forgiving, but Richie craned his neck forward until his forehead rested against Stan's sweat and grime matted curls, "Still real. Still here. Just breathe."

The first haggard gasp that pressed to Richie's ribs felt like salvation. A wash running through him as air coated Stan's lungs. Stan pressed back to him, letting Richie's head knock back to the rumbling car floor as Stan curled impossibly smaller against him.

Beverly was whispering something, arms open and unthreatening. Something bad must be happening, but Richie didn't - couldn't care. A piece of him had been ripped away while he'd watched. Sat there

dumb as Stan had cried out for him. For help. For mercy. Richie kissed his forehead, nose squashed against his curls as he breathed in blood and sweat and *Stan* .

Richie had felt like he was coming apart at the seams. Untethered and too loud and about three seconds from a breakdown. But Stan had grabbed the string in him, pulled and cinched his guts back to place and letting his weight press Richie back into his skin. His hands slipped beneath Stan's shirt, just needing - needing *closer* - intimacy that couldn't be diluted to something as crude as sexual. Something deeper. Like he needed to smear Stan's skin against his own. To fill the outline that had been whittling away into nothing.

Stan inhaled as Richie blew hot air against his scalp. Richie mirroring him until it felt like the air between them was just their own. A bubble tentatively allowing itself to comfort them once more. Stan had kissed him in a bubble like this before. Soft chapped lips finding his own until a gunshot rang out to knock them to reality.

Faces tilted until noses knocked and gasps passed between them in shotgunned lungfuls. Richie went cross eyed looking at him. At Stan - Stan *the Man* Uris who had found whatever mess of a heart Richie had left. A tear fell onto Richie's cheek, pink tinged with popped vessels and something he was sure Stan would be grossed out by under rational circumstances. But Richie just leaned up instead. The air filled the space between molars until Stan swallowed and adjusted. His palms came up to trace the rings under Richie's eyes. Bitten to the quick nails feathering across thin bruised skin. Memorizing. Healing. Richie was pretty sure if he *was* shot he wouldn't pull away now.

And he didn't. Not as the car jostled across pavement and into packed dirt roads. It wasn't even a kiss anymore - not really - just sharing air, allowing themselves a singular moment to just - just - exist. To not feel like they were going to crack any further than they'd already done. Beverly would definitely tease them about it - smacking face like teenagers - once they were safe. Because they were going to be safe. They were going to be okay, soon, soonsoonsoon.

"Where's Billy?"

A chill settled against Richie. The once soft weight going rigid above him. Richie wanted to hold him, keep him just in this bubble. But he wouldn't risk that. He wouldn't push Stan anywhere - towards or away. He'd had more than enough of that.

But Stan didn't pull away, didn't look up to the seventh voice. If anything, he burrowed deeper against Richie. Richie held him tight - trying to be sure Stan was still here with them at all. He twisted his head to find Stan's eyes, to tell him this was real. It was okay. But - Stan's expression wasn't anything he'd seen before.

Agony was carved into the bruised freckles across his skin. He recognized the voice.

No one spoke. A grim silence had fallen over them all. The voice spoke up again, "Where's Billy?"

Beverly finally mumbled, "He didn't make it."

Richie's eyes didn't leave Stan's face - he'd assumed as much, honestly. Denbrough hadn't come hobbling out with the rest. And the time it took them to get out? Three guesses on what happened. First two don't count.

But Stan's eyes tipped up, away from the bubble and to the boy who was now peaking over the back of the seat row.

"Georgie," He choked. A rich sadness rattling in him, weighing them both down.

"What? He," Georgie, Richie finally looked to him, was a fucking *kid*. Jesus Christ. Georgie Denbrough. The mythic baby guide. He looked maybe seventeen. A yellow sweatshirt that was clearly not his own was bunched at his elbows. He looked like Bill. Blonder, maybe. Less unruly hair. Wider eyes. He also looked kinder.

But right now he just looked devastated.

"He turned on us." Beverly snapped. There was sympathy in her eyes, but not regret, "He traded Stan for you. Made a deal so you wouldn't be brought in and Stan would be a husk."

“He *what?!* ” Richie spit, holding Stan tighter.

Georgie shook his head, “He wouldn’t -”

“- He *did* -” Beverly cut.

“- Billy, no, he -”

“- Georgie.” Mike said softly from the driver’s seat. Everyone fell quiet. Waited for him to look in the rear view and meet Georgie’s flooding eyes, “Bill loves you. More than anything. And people don’t think straight when they care about someone. He wanted to help you the only way he could see how.”

“Mike,” Georgie hiccuped, voice trying so hard to be steady, “Please let me out.”

Mike sighed, face weary, “No, Georgie.”

“Please,” He begged, “I, I,”

“Bill would want you safe, right?” Mike asked instead, silencing Georgie, “He’d want you to be okay.”

Richie watched Georgie’s lip wobble, bitten violently between a quaking jaw. He fell back behind the seat row, a hiccuped sob that made him seem impossibly younger floated across the other six. No one spoke again. Stan looked - god, Stan - he looked ready to die. A guilt in his eyes that Richie wanted to ease away.

“Stan agreed,” Beverly said softly, “He gave himself up so Eddie and I could leave.”

Richie’s lungs stalled in place. He looked to Stan, to hope to Christ that didn’t almost happen, but Stan was still looking at the spot Georgie had been.

“Eddie saved him, he was gone for - fuck I don’t even know, for too long. I thought he’d died.”

“Floated,” Stan whispered, “I was floating.”

“Well it was horrible,” Beverly said, “And Bill let it happen.”

“I’m sorry,” Georgie called so softly from the trunk, “I’m sorry, Stan.”

Stan looked like he’d been stabbed worse than Beverly. A quake ran through them both at the misery that sank into his marrow. Richie thought of the cliff. Of how Stan still harbored a guilt inked just beneath his skin.

Stan shook his head, curls brushing Richie’s cheek as he tried to - to do what? Stan had nothing to be sorry for.

“If Billy had known I,” Georgie choked again, catching his breath, “If he knew where I was, maybe he wouldn’t have. I’m sorry, Stan. I’m so sorry, it’s my fault,”

“It’s not,” Stan finally said, lifting himself up and off of Richie. Richie let him go, watched him sway and stumble up onto the seat, at Beverly’s alarm, at how she paused when she saw his face. How she helped him tip over into the trunk space.

“He loved you,” Stan whispered, Georgie gasped a fresh sob at the past tense, “He loved you more than anything. He was the best big brother.”

An *oof*, rang out and Richie shot up, alarm rising. But Beverly, who was watching the two guides, gently put her hand on his chest. Whatever just happened - Stan was okay.

“He loved you so much,” Stan kept on, voice muffled now as Georgie wailed, “I know he did. He just wanted to help you. I’m not mad. He did his best.”

Richie took Beverly’s hand from his chest and laced their fingers. She slid to lie beside him, parallel across seat and floor space. Richie pressed the back of her hand to his forehead and let Stan’s words wash over him. Despite his best efforts; he was asleep in moments.

Looming obelisks had been replaced by blurred trees, whipping past the pollen dusted van windows. The skyline's cerulean view had dipped into pink and basked the edges of Richie's vision in a rich rose glow. A panic laced through him, barely lasting an instant before a tug in his chest reassured him that - though Stan wasn't in eye line - he was still within reach.

Richie leaned precariously over a sleeping Mike, Beverly now in the driver's seat beside a slumped over Ben. His knees protested, pins and needles waved in retaliation, but any discomfort would've been worth seeing Stanley in that light.

He was still dirty - wearing the scars and scabs of his hell - but the rose colored windowpane left his skin with a peachy soft tint. He was asleep, thank god, and had Georgie and Eddie tight up against him. The latter must've climbed his way across the benches and curled up under Stan's arm. It was funny though, even though Stan was holding him; Eddie'd tossed his front over Stan's chest. He looked sort of like a shield. Georgie was out for the count too, with his head resting on Stan's lap. They were packed in tight back there, just shy of crammed, but Richie'd been attempting to read up on what little accurate info there was on guides. And if they were helping keep each other calm then let them fucking sleep on top of one another all they wanted.

A soft, "We're here," called from the front. Richie nudged Mike awake, but decided to let the trunk cargo get at least a few minutes more rest. The thick pines parted to reveal an ornate cabin.

"Sweet fuckin' digs," Richie mumbled, sliding to sit like a person besides an upright Mike.

The car gentled into park, but the three boys in the back woke up as if a gun had shot off behind them. Richie's first reflex was to reach for Stan, to reassure him he wasn't wherever the fuck they'd been keeping him; but Eddie came between them. His expression radiated such hostility that Richie didn't even need to feel the *GET BACK* before he was lurching away.

“Jesus, shrimp,” Richie bit, heart hammering, “What’s up your ass?”

“Richie,” Mike warned, but Eddie seemed to come back to himself a moment later; brain catching up to their new surroundings. The shove in Richie’s chest faded, but Eddie’s brow didn’t leave its scrunched crease even as Stan sat up beside him.

“Hey,” Stan mumbled. Sleep crusted his eyes, hair mused until curls parted to a fluffy cloud.

“Hey,” Richie whispered, expression open and probably fucking stupid, but, god, c’mon.

Georgie didn’t speak, still glued to Stan’s side. His face was contorting through a myriad of emotions - no doubt remembering the fate of *Billy The Betrayer*. Richie wanted to feel spiteful - was spiteful - but a pang of guilt rattled in his chest for the taunts he’d said with Billy’s brother hiding in the trunk. Always the trashmouth.

Richie stumbled out of the back seat, legs aching as he stretched. He nearly ate shit as he rounded to the trunk door, needing to let the three stowaways out; keep them from being contained again in any capacity.

Stan hopped out first, squinting at the pooling sunset, before turning back to grab Eddie. The shrimp still looked like shit, sleep hadn’t done much in the way of beauty for him. The two leaned on each other, finding their balance, and trying to not look like they were about to cry. Richie, for once in his life, didn’t comment. Best to let that marinate for a few hours. Let it age. Like a wine.

“ - Richie,” Stan repeated, snapping the boy back into focus.

“What?”

“Do you know where we are?”

“We’re...” He paused, looking around. The map was in his mind’s eye. He had the route memorized just hours ago. But, in the moment, really having Stan safe and in proximity? “Surrounded by green shit.”

God, if looks could kill. But Eddie wheezed a laugh that his glare

didn't quite hide well enough. Ha.

"We're in Redding," Beverly offered, "Or at least around it. Not out of California yet, but it's only -"

"- Seven hundred miles to go." Richie mumbled, "We're gonna be walking a good bit. The real LA in us is gonna shine - all we do is eat tacos and hike."

Eddie nudged Stan, and started doing some alarmingly fast gestures complete with half mouthed words that Stan seemed fuckin' fluent in.

"Why not Mexico?" Stan asked, "It's -"

"- The go-to," Ben said, "Everyone trying to get out takes the Southern border. Only idiots would try to hike for a week-"

"- Two weeks," Mike corrected.

"- *Two* weeks to get North."

"And they're over estimating our intelligence." Richie quipped, a laugh in his voice.

The front door clicked open, Stan and Eddie jolting, but a head of blue hair popped out and left Stan gaping.

"Hey, fugitives," Noelle called, "Did you wanna get inside or keep standing in open airspace?"

A few hours and fifteen stitches to the resident redhead later; the gang all began to settle.

Stan had been wary to cross the threshold, recognizing Noelle but still hesitant to breach another new location with the *escape* still not quite processing in his head. Richie didn't rush it, in fact, he left him

out on the porch. It tugged at his ribs how Stan looked stunned at that, reaching before pulling his hand back to his chest. But Richie came flying back out at breakneck speed with -

“Piper?” Stan’s voice was so fragile, and the flightless bird risked plummeting to flap a few feet before Stan dove for her. The tears were fat and instant. Noelle looked almost embarrassed to witness it. But Richie just reached Stan back to his feet and got him to at least drop to a couch before his heart gave out at seeing his girl again.

The house had calmed down though, Mike going to patch up Beverly and Ben helping pass out food and water to everyone left waiting for them to return.

The dining room table, complete with an intricate stag antler chandelier, looked like the prop table in an apocalypse movie. Seven packs lay on the floor with gaping empty mouths. The hardwood held blankets, tightly rolled sleeping bags, knives, unfamiliar warm winter gear, what might be a tent, bottles, *shovels and toilet paper* - shit. Literally. *Ha*.

“I’m just gonna assume none of you know what you’re doing so...” Noelle gestured broadly, “Survival 101.”

“How did you get all this?” Georgie quietly asked.

“Stan’s man is famous - remember?” Beverly laughed. Richie shrugged mildly, trying to not look as overwhelmed as he felt.

“I gave the hobbit all the cash I could get discreetly for our trip to Mordor.”

“*Frodo goes to* - never mind,” Noelle pinched the bridge of her nose in what Richie decided to find poorly hidden admiration. “Point is; you’ll get there alive with this. It’s spring, but in the Northwest that means mud and rain and cold hell. So you’ll be able to camp on some sites without being bothered. This map,” She tapped on a small laminated booklet, “Is the best combo of unseen and stocked to the border. The Canadians have asylum seekers come all the time so they’re patrolling their forests for people that... wanna be treated like people. Can any of you read a compass?”

“It’s just North, right?” Richie laughed.

“So that’s a no.”

Stan, a former Boy Scout, began to raise his hand along with Georgie and Ben before Eddie’s arm shot out to grab the disk. He flipped it in his grip once, twice, before tucking it to his chest and walking away.

“I see we’re going with stealth,” Richie hummed before catching two elbows to the side for his filter.

A few more items were passed out with explanations: first aid kits for Stan, Mike, and Beverly. Buoy knives for Richie and Ben. Flashlights, toiletries, multitools, and water bottles with some magic shit to make it clean for all of them.

The last item was a gun.

“We have more,” Noelle offered, “Like, way more; but you’re trying to be discreet. This one was a gift, so there’s no official paperwork on it tying it to me or us. If one from the safe was missing, people would have a trail to follow.”

“Makes sense,” Beverly mumbled, staring at the polished metal. It was... well it was a gun. A handgun was the most descriptive he could guess. Black. Richie didn’t know how many shots it held; just that a small box of bullets was beside it.

“I wouldn’t suggest it for food,” Noelle continued, spinning it in her hand with a confidence no one else felt, “9mm, eight shots including the chamber. It’s small but loud. Just - I figured, if it came to it -”

“- Thank you,” Ben said, quietly taking it from her. She started to talk about handling; but Richie was looking at Stan.

He didn’t look scared of it, none of the aching fear that left Richie grinning uncomfortably was there. He looked... blank. It was worse. It was so much worse. He was staring at the box of bullets. *If it came to it*

If it came to it

“Hey,” Richie whispered, palms up to avoid any shock back into awareness on Stan’s part. But there was no jump. No jolt. He just turned, eyes still empty, face blank, “It’s not gonna come to *that* .”

Stan didn’t say anything. But after a moment his gaze fell away, the red in his eyes brightening as his throat seemed to close. Richie put a hand in his hair, careful of any injuries he couldn’t see, and tugged the boy’s cheek to his chest.

“Worse comes to worst,” He said, feeling Stan’s breath catch, “I’ll just end up shooting myself trying to quickdraw on a squirrel.”

The snicker that bubbled out was everything. He kissed Stan’s crown as he wheezed, “Why does the squirrel have a gun?”

“He doesn’t,” Richie lamented, “He’s just talking mad shit. Unacceptable. Lot’s of slurs about my mother.”

“Okay,” Stan agreed, “Quickdraw away.”

“No, Stanley,” Richie moaned, “That’s how I get *shot* .”

“Well the squirrel can be a good replacement,”

“Cruel,” Richie laughed, hugging him in a soft squeeze, “Just cruel.”

A loud crash echoed from the side room. Stan’s nails dug sharply into Richie’s shoulder, Richie’s arms squeezing him closer; shielding him.

“Guys?” Richie called. A second crash answered him.

“Eddie, it’s okay,” Mike echoed down the hall, “It’s Eddie, right? Just, *stop* - “

Stan’s grip slid down Richie’s back and arms until their fingers linked. Richie followed quickly behind him, amazed and completely unsurprised at how Stan dove in after Eddie. He’d seen it in his eyes - even across the loading bay. A sharp fire that he’d only seen awaken for their circle. That was an initiation enough; earning Stan’s bravery.

The boy was built on self preservation. Years of hostility and well

bred propaganda didn't allow for anything else. There wasn't a single soul spared from the idea that something in Stanley's DNA made him *less than* . And how could a kid - a *child* - ever hope to combat that? Ever try to explain that he was still the same person? That he was really a person at all? It wasn't feasible. And Richie wouldn't even think to blame him for not trying. Better to blend. To hide away into wallpaper and watch the world flash by him. To be a nobody was better than to be noticed for guides. Beverly had told him about Betty. About who Stan saw when he stared somewhere Richie couldn't see. The way he froze, the guilt that bore down on his bones.

That hadn't been his fault. He couldn't have saved her; Richie knew Stan understood that. But it wasn't how he felt. But how many guides, how many *children* had been left in those walls while their huddle drove away? You can't save everyone. Half the time you couldn't even save anyone.

The bright orange handle of the multi tool glinted from Stan's back pocket. Garish.

REPORT ROGUES

No one cared to.

"*Fuck-*" Cut through old haunts in Richie's head. Noelle looked torn halfway between furious and nervous. A crash smacked to Richie's right, making Stan and him both jump, porcelain shards spilling around dirty sneakers and boots.

Eddie stood with his back to the wall, shoulders hunched, a second plate yanked from a display shelf in his hand. Beverly and Noelle were both trying to get closer, talking to him; but he was staring at Ben.

At the gun in Ben's hand.

"Drop it," Stan said, "Ben, put it down."

Ben seemed to snap back into himself, a look of horror in his eyes as he finally made the connections on whatever Eddie was imagining.

He didn't throw it, but it was a close thing. Noelle grabbed the discarded firearm, rushing it out of the room. Richie knew the look on Ben's face. The heartsick grief of being the thing they're afraid of. But Eddie's eyes followed the gun, and Ben's shoulders dropped.

The tension was horrible. Suffocating. Richie felt a little stupid with how Stan stood in front of him. Blocking him and the six inches he had on him. Then again apparently Stan could blow shit up with his mind or something - which - awesome. But.

"It's..." Ben's throat clicked, face flushing in a disgustingly endearing way that almost seemed impossible on his bearded rugged face, "It's Eddie, right?"

Eddie didn't move, eyes flicking back to Ben. He didn't look apologetic, but a grimace of embarrassment seemed to take him as he put the plate back. His back didn't leave the wooden panelled wall. Rigid against it, waiting for it to help him.

Ben took a step closer. Eddie flinched.

"I," He didn't know what to do with his hands, waving softly at his sides, "I don't know if you remember me. I'm Ben, um, we... met before," Every word was soft, nervous, and he seemed to wish he could choke them back as they came.

Eddie didn't move. His eyes went to Stan and back to Ben.

"I know you can't talk," Mike tried to help, not moving forward but mumbling just loud enough for Eddie's gaze to swing. Georgie was hiding behind Mike, holding out a notebook and pen. Shit, of course he could -

"Eddie's right handed," Stan said quietly. Richie looked back to Eddie. To the angry scar that sliced across where his forearm should be. Ben hadn't said anything about one hand.

Eddie looked near tears. An angry frustrated... well, it wasn't really a noise, but it bubbled out just the same. He wasn't looking at any of them anymore. At the people who were circling and staring at him like he... oh *fuck*.

“Bevvie,” Richie called softly, “Mickie, c’mon.” He waved them to the door, “Let’s - c’mon,”

He let go of Stan’s arm, pushed him forward just enough to get him moving, and walked through the doorway. Georgie followed after them, which, fuck good call, kid. Only Ben and Stan stayed behind.

Noelle was waiting at the table, a mug of some bottle already poured for each of them. Richie was unlucky enough to grab the seat that stared back through the doorway. None of them had moved in there. Like a horrible museum exhibit he shouldn’t look at in the first place. He wished he had his glasses; force them to at least be blurry.

He started to swirl his cup, glazed ceramic scraping across polished hardwood in a numbing swirl. He couldn’t look away, he wasn’t about to lie and say he was that good of a person; but he could try to keep from eavesdropping completely.

Ben’s mouth was moving, hands splayed, not walking towards but trying to get Eddie to stop locking himself against the wall. Eddie’s eyes were wide, pooling wet with a scrunched brow and bit lip to seem more angry than devastated. Maybe that was why he’d snagged the compass. Gave himself a vital position. He couldn’t talk to them. Couldn’t communicate. And by the looks of that scar his lack of self dependence had been instilled recently.

Richie took a long swallow of his drink, eyes stinging past just the bite of liquor.

He didn’t want to be left behind.

And the gun? The fucking gun just coming up behind him without a word? Fuck. He thought they were just gonna shoot him. He smelled like he hadn’t had a bath or a shit in days. He already looked dead - way worse than Stan did. If Stan was a project; Eddie wasn’t even an object.

Richie scraped his mug round and round.

But Ben’s hands weren’t prone anymore, they were... what the fuck was he doing? Some weird attempt at a half formed fist and then

lifting his pointer... pointer... pinkie... dumb fist. Again and again. Richie stopped moving his cup, oddly transfixed by the repetition, smooth and deliberate, like a wave.

“-D-I-E.” Richie jumped, nearly vaulting out of his chair - before, “E-D-D-”

Sign language.

Eddie looked somewhere between sobbing and screaming. But a laugh bubbled out instead. A wheezing hiss with a hysterical smile and ruddy cheeks. But his back wasn't to the wall anymore. Instead he was sitting, legs giving beneath him. Ben had crouched, probably in effort not to loom. Stan had half crawled to Eddie's side, hand on his brow, talking to him. But Eddie was watching Ben.

“I'm sorry,” Ben said, rubbing a fist on his chest, “Sorry - that's - god, I'm-”

Stan reached for Ben, but Eddie started to shake his head. Stan leaned in, fluent in however they could talk to each other, and pressed his forehead to Eddie's own. He shook his own head and reached for Ben again. The two of them helped Eddie to his feet. Stan on his right, Ben on his left. Eddie's hand knotted into the front of Ben's jacket for balance. He didn't let go.

“There're a lot of words with one hand,” He heard Ben offer, “And everyone knows the alphabet so... I know it's not, I mean,”

Eddie mouth something, his lips wobbling too hard to really be decipherable. “How do you say ‘thank you?’” Stan asked.

Ben tapped his hand from his chin and let it fall forward. Eddie let go of his jacket and repeated the motion.

“Oh, uh, that was *bitch* - your palm goes like,” He turned Eddie's positioning, a chuckle coming out at Eddie's attempt at a withering stare. Eddie tried again:

THANKS BITCH

His hand found his jacket again.

Richie turned away.

“Yeah, so free reign of the place. But, y’know, try not to look like you were ever here, I guess?” Noelle twirled her keys, fidgeting as she stared at them. “There’s plenty of blankets in the hall closet. Have fun. Don’t die.”

“Thank you,” Mike said, drawing a laugh out of her.

“Yeah, sure.” She winked, turned, and left.

The door clicked shut, Beverly quickly turning and slotting each lock down the hardwood. A silence hung between them now. A hesitancy on next steps, on options. The redhead gestured to the now packed bags, neatly lined up like toy soldiers along the foyer wall.

“We’ll set out tomorrow morning, go over the route one more time; but for now we should all try to sleep,” She grinned sheepishly, “Probably the only bed we’ll get for awhile.”

Everyone nodded, scattered agreements falling around them. Georgie, Mike, and Beverly went to the upper floor where two couches and a twin bed were already decked out with blankets. Ben went for the living room couch, Eddie trailing softly behind him. Ben turned, blinking, with a, “There’s a bed still, over there...” But Eddie was already smacking a pillow down on the other sofa. Perpendicular to Ben’s own; their heads side by side. Jesus, haystack, take a hint.

Richie laughed once, quickly ducking the throw pillow that went flying for his head, before following Stan down to the basement.

“There’s a bed upstairs,” Richie offered, “If you wanted to, y’know, have windows?”

“No,” Stan said quickly. He paused, sheepishly clearing his throat before continuing, “There’s - there’s a lot of space up there. Too many

windows. Too many doors. I can't -"

"- No problem, Stan the Man," Richie interrupted, "I get it. S'all good."

The two stood staring at each other. A jumble of nerves that felt so nostalgic danced across the hairs of Richie's neck. Piper trilled from Stan's shoulder, making him laugh, making him *smile*. Fuck. Stan looked back to Richie.

He opened his mouth, a quick inhale, bracing himself - for what, Richie could only hope - before his freckles rippled across scrunched cheeks.

"I smell."

"Yeah," Richie agreed, "Like shit."

Stan found it in himself to look offended, hiding his smile under indignance, "You weren't gonna say anything?"

"What can I say?" Richie lamented, hip cocking as his arms fell slack with dramatics, "I'm sweet on ya,"

"Well that's just gross -"

"- I know, you really are -"

"- Shut *up*," Stan laughed, before scrubbing grime around his skin, "Yeah, okay, I feel disgusting."

Richie nodded, voice softening, "Yeah, I'll grab a first aid kit. You'll probably want to put something on those cuts. I mean, I don't know how much it'll help now..." Stan stiffened, hand coming up to hide some of the gruesome scabs, "No, Stan, it's - I just don't want them to get infected. It's okay,"

But Stan had sunk to where Richie couldn't see. Piper cooing and tugging on matted curls. Richie sighed, kicking himself for his wording, and gently took Stan's shoulders. He guided them both to the bathroom. A small tub with a daisy shower curtain took up most of it. Richie sat Stan on the toilet lid before opening up the medicine

cabinet. Band-aids, neosporin, hydrogen peroxide. He glanced at Stan's face, trying not to stare; most of the cuts had already healed up, scabbed or scarred over. But at least ten were still pink - and he could try to help with those.

Richie held a hand out to Piper, who accepted with only mild finger biting carnage. Richie dropped her off on the spigot of the sink, eye level with Stan - who had watched her as she moved. Good, watch the bird. Focus on something in the room.

He doesn't think this is real

"Okay," Richie said, voice loud enough to startle Stan's pupils back into contracting, "You just strip to your gimmies, and I'll let you have a good scrub. Just yell when you're done and we can play doctor and I'll rub gunk on your face until you find me cute. Deal?"

He wagged a brow, Stan rolling his eyes but starting to yank his shoes off. Richie turned away, satisfied, and yanked the shower handle.

Richie wasn't sure what was louder; The shriek of old pipes, the water shooting into the tiled wall, or Stan throwing himself to the floor.

"Stan?!" Richie shouted, but Stan flinched at that, arms coming up to hide his face - *fuck* , "Stanley," He tried again, voice soft, nervous, "Stanley, what's wrong?"

But Stan's eyes weren't there anymore. From behind shaking forearms he stared at and through Richie. Wide eyed and terrified.

He doesn't think this is real

"Stanley," Richie started again, knees cracking as he dropped to a crouch beside him, "Stanley Uris. You're in Redding, California. I'm Richie Tozier. You're in a bathroom and I don't know why you're -"

"I'm sorry," He gasped, but he - he wasn't there, he wasn't there, "I'm sorry, don't - it's so cold, please - I -"

Richie took a chance and grabbed Stan's arms. The other boy's head

whapped against the side of the toilet, but Richie held firm. He lowered them away and down until he could reach up for Stan's face. His hands practically dwarfed Stan's face, but he leaned in until Stan couldn't look anywhere else.

"You're Stanley Uris and you're safe," He swore, "They're not here and it's gonna be okay. I promise."

He kept saying it. Over and over. The words weren't even in the right order anymore; some soothing jumble of nonsense. Accents and voices came in and out. It felt really stupid. Really fucking stupid to stack himself down small and whisper and hope that was gonna be enough. But it felt right too. It felt like when Stan ran his fingers through his hair. When the thrum of his bones would still. It felt like when Mike laughed and when Beverly hugged him and when Ben learned Eddie's name.

Stan came back to himself slowly, agonizingly so. He blinked, really seemed to focus, and saw Richie. With the awareness came the shame - a dance Richie was all too fucking familiar with - and Stan started to try and shift away, a ruddy glow heating his face.

"No," Richie hummed, "C'mon, none of that. I'm the only dumbass here, quota's full," Stan kicked him, a soft tap of bird boned ankle to his cramping thigh. But it was enough for Richie to tip with a quick, "Oh, fuck, timber," Before spilling across shagged bathmat beside him. Stan looked guilty for about three seconds before a giggle slipped out, "So rude, Stanley. You wounded me."

"It's not my fault you're twenty feet tall,"

"A mighty oak," Stan snorted at that. Richie just looked at him, let him keep tapping his ankle against him, "Can you tell me what it was?" He asked softly.

Stan didn't stiffen, small miracles, but he looked away, "They... it's stupid - the water,"

"It's not stupid." Richie sat up, startling Stan with the weight in his tone, "Nothing about that was stupid, so shut that shit down. Do you want me to turn the water off?"

"I need to shower," Stan said, but his voice was reedy. He wouldn't look to where the steam spilled out.

"I can draw a bath -" The other boy somehow tensed even more, "- No bath, fuck baths - stupid fuckin' baths. Who needs 'em?"

The laugh didn't reach his eyes, despite his best efforts, "I liked them," Stan admitted. Past tense.

"Well, a shower it is then," Richie finally said after a long pause. He slowly stood, pulling Stan up with him, "I'll be right outside the door if you want. You don't even have to shut the door. Help heat this place, honestly. Piper is loving the sauna."

Richie stepped back to the doorway, letting Stan set the temperature; adjust it to whatever he needed to feel better. The embarrassment was still there, but at least the shame had dwindled away. Richie turned on his heel when Stan started to pull off his scrubs shirt.

"I think we're a little past dignity," Stan called, humor in his voice.

"I cannot bear to watch you bare, Stanleh," Richie drawled, a flawless slip into Southern Belle, "I simpleh couldn' handle it. The vapors, Stanleh, the vapors -"

"- Oh my god, shut up, Christ." The laugh was like a bell.

A lull fell, and Richie would deny to his grave that his ears pinked at the thought of Stan naked behind him, but he didn't risk getting an eye full and making it all that much more awkward for his mildly confused half chub. It had to be the easing, really. The adrenaline and endorphins and curly hair and -

"Richie?"

"Yeah?" Richie croaked, "What's up?"

The patter of water had changed, Stan was clearly in the shower now, but his voice was quiet, nervous. Crisis of erections be damned, Richie peeked over his shoulder.

Stan was crying. Fuck.

"Hey," Richie slid across the bathroom to the edge of the tub where Stan was sitting inside, "What's wrong?"

The dirt was sluicing off of him. Muck and musk and whatever else washing away down the drain. He had thought he'd be relieved. But he just looked... defeated.

"They're not gonna let us leave," Stan whispered, arms scrubbing violently across rapidly pinkening skin, "They're not - we - *I killed someone,*"

"No," Richie shushed, "Bill wasn't -"

"- *No.*" Stan snapped, head shooting up to stare at Richie's wide eyes, "I killed Rory. I - she wasn't a Sentinel. Or a - I killed her. It wasn't an accident. I *wanted* to. She, she,"

"Did she do that to your face?" Richie asked. Stan nodded, droplets flying, "Then she had it coming. They tortured you, Stanley. I don't even know what happened in there, but you didn't deserve any of it and -"

"I'm not the person from before," Stan whispered, a sob cracking out, "I'm not... I'm not. They," He shuddered a breath, breaking Richie's heart, "I'm not."

"You are though," Richie whispered, hand risking crossing the porcelain boundary and gripping one of Stan's own. It shook as he laced their fingers together, "You're just hurt. And tired. And that's okay. You're still *you*; just..." He gestured vaguely, "Older."

"It was my birthday," Stan mumbled.

"Oh, damn," Richie groaned, "Too old for me now. I gotta keep a creepy Hollywood male image; why'd you have to go and age?"

"How dare I." Stan said, voice flat. Richie kissed his hand. Soap bubbles and stale water imprinted on his lips.

Richie spit into the toilet beside him, "Gross,"

Stan snorted, whapping him in the face with his soapy hand again,

leaving a slimy feeling on his cheek. Richie twisted so his back was to the wall, side by side with Stan, intertwined hands resting on the porcelain rim. They stayed like that, breathing in the steam, running up the water bill. The bond between them floated through their veins. It hadn't ever left, not really. Richie didn't think his soul would've allowed it. Would've just clung to the memories of couch crashing and first kisses and breakfast before ever giving Stanley up. It was more powerful than any sleeping pill, but not at all disorienting. Just - just home. Richie almost dozed before Stan shifted just enough to rouse him.

"I need to wash my hair," He mumbled, one hand uncapping the shampoo, "It's gross and your cuddling can't magically fix that,"

"Do you consider hand holding while separated by a wall cuddling?" Richie asked sleepily, "Cause babe I got news for you,"

Stan couldn't seem to figure out how to get the gel into his hand, hesitant to just pour it to his scalp, before Richie reached across with his free hand. Stan blinked. And stared at him.

"Teamwork, dreamwork, lemme touch your hair," The bond was making him loose lipped, careless, and Richie started to retract his palm with a joke at the ready before a glob of cool gel hit it.

Stan looked redder than any shower heat could manage. A pink flush spreading to his chest where Richie was *not* going to keep looking. Richie shuffled closer, side flush to the tub, and ran his hand carefully into the curls. He almost immediately hit snarls, but just eased them loose before gliding deeper into the grown out cherub crown.

It wasn't until all the snags were gone, and Richie was able to scratch along the scalp freely, that he realized Stan had never raised his own hand to help. The other boy looked near asleep, head tipped just slightly back, mouth parted and eyes shut lax. Richie watched his face, entranced, as he scratched along the nape of his neck. The sigh that left Stan was... yeah. Okay. okayokayokay. His palm brushed raised skin, and Stan started to tense beneath his hand, before Richie shushed him and traveled back up and away.

Stan eventually blinked his eyes open, trying to hide how embarrassed he was with a quick, "I should wash this out," Before shutting the curtain tight between them. It was sort of adorable. But Richie didn't tease. Stan had plenty of ammunition back at him.

"So if hand holding is cuddling," Richie asked, arm still captive behind the plastic scrim, "Was that third base just now?"

A washcloth flew out and slapped into his face. Worth it.

Richie had the decency to leave the bathroom while Stan towelled off before coming back in to clean the remaining open cuts. Stan hissed between clenched teeth at the bite of peroxide; but Richie kissed waterlogged curls until Stan swatted him away with a laugh. Neosporin worked for most of them, deep but thin, precise. Richie bit back whatever rage wanted to build and instead just put two bandaids over the worst ones. careful to avoid catching any hair in the adhesive as he plastered down his right cheek and left temple.

The scar on the back of his neck was brutal, cruel and cauterized. Just below and to the side was a smaller cut long healed over, hardly a knick, but deep all the same. It didn't line up with the rest of the brutality. Too medical to match his face but too small to match his... procedure.

"Do you know what that is?" Richie asked.

Stan felt it, fingers dancing along pocketed skin in surprise. He thought about it for a long moment, seeming surprised about it there at all before answering, "They put a tracker there."

Richie's blood ran cold. "A what?"

"But that was with a shot," Stan rushed, "They..." He pressed hard, not finding what he was looking for, "They took it out. I guess when they did the... when they changed the collar."

"Can they track you?"

"I don't think so," Stan said, "They bragged about the collar. What it could do. But they didn't mention that." He smiled grimly, "They probably thought I'd never get far enough to need it."

"Well they were wrong and fuck them for it," Richie said with finality.

Stan scooped Piper up with a nod before leaving the room, letting Richie hop in the shower quickly after him just to get the leftover adrenaline sweat off of himself. He came out of the bathroom, fleece pajama pants yanked on, to find Stan sitting primly at the edge of the bed. He bounced Piper in his hands, holding her almost like a little baby. It looked a bit ridiculous, but both of them seemed to love it.

"I can sleep on the couch," Richie offered, waiting for Stan to look up, "If that would be better. I mean, we only slept together once, so,"

"I guess we'll need to do it again then," Stan mumbled as he placed Piper onto a pillow beside the bed, ears pink but a laugh in his throat, "So we aren't sluts."

Richie cackled, dropping beside him, "Speak for yourself, babe."

The queen mattress was significantly more space to move around on, not immediately pressing them together like Richie's couch had allowed. Richie slipped beneath the sheets first, nerves spurring him into action - feeling like a fumbling teen more than a grown ass man about to illegally cross a border and run from the government.

Stan followed close behind, laying on his side facing Richie. Richie turned too, both staring at each other like a couple of dorks.

"There's a TV, we could put on a movie?"

"Trying to make a move, Uris?" Richie hummed, "That your move? Wait for plot twists and try to kiss me?"

An alarming amount of expressions mashed across Stan's face before he mumbled, "Do I need to?"

“To what?” Richie asked, worry and doubt flooding in, “To kiss me? No, fuck -”

“- To set up an elaborate plot twist,” Stan huffed, eyes wide at Richie’s alarm, “Jesus.”

“Oh,” Richie said, “Uh. No. Not necessary.”

“Okay.”

They stared at each other. Waiting.

“Have you ever camped before?” Stan asked.

“Nope, you?”

“Boy Scout. So, yeah, once -”

Richie dipped in, kissing him softly, Stan’s words swallowed on his tongue. A laugh filtered between them, though Richie couldn’t tell where it began. His arms came up, wrapping around Stan’s waist as the other boy’s curled around his shoulders. Two boys half sprawled across each other, snickering kisses into each other’s lips like secrets. Like promises. It was cathartic and sweet and a little stupid.

But for the first time in months Richie slept through the night.

Notes for the Chapter:

we back baby. let me know if it sucked.

23. ublažiti

“Wait,” Richie said, causing the huddle to stumble in the driveway.

“What?” Ben asked. Stan watched the worry crease across his face, how Eddie stiffened next to him - hardly having left either his or Stan’s side since they woke this morning.

“Are we really going to a town called Weed?” Richie whispered, “Do we really get to do that?”

“Holy shit, Richie.” Beverly groaned.

“This is the greatest day of my life,” Richie preened. He looked ridiculous with the massive pack on his back. Layered up in fleece and windbreakers and a beanie trying to contain his grown out hair.

“Stan, please hit him.” Mike called from the front of the group. Stan swiped up and caught the back of Richie’s head.

“Sorry, sorry,” Richie said, smile still huge, “Other than the day *you* kids were born,”

“Stan.”

“Yep.” But Richie caught the hand that time, lacing their fingers together with a toothy grin. Stan tried to swing it one more time, skewing Richie’s glasses with his own wrist before just letting their fingers hang together.

Eddie waved at them, a wide eyed smile on his face. Richie turned to him, tugging Stan’s hand, “See? Eds understands me -”

BITCH

“... Well that’s just rude,” He hummed, and Stan couldn’t stop the laugh even at Richie’s wounded stare, “Ben, he’s being rude!”

“I think he’s just saying what we’re not brave enough to,” Ben reasoned. Eddie tapped his arm with his knuckles, more a brush rather than a swat, and Ben smiled at him.

The trail had been mapped out by Noelle, neat lines of sharpie flowing through national parks, small towns, camp sites, and eventually international borders. It seemed easy enough - a very wobbly line North. Small exes along the path with places to stop and get food or supplies. But it couldn't be that simple. Stan wouldn't let himself be tricked into believing something that kind.

None of them had phones, no cellular tracking - they'd been left back in Los Angeles. So it was up to Eddie to keep them on the right path, compass gripped tight in his good hand. They'd walk as far as they could stand and camp when the sun set. Two tents were brought along - one big enough to hold seven, the burden of carrying was to be passed around every few hours, and one to hold their bags. Snow would be farther North, still in flurried tufts at most if they were lucky. Most of them hadn't camped since they were kids. Richie hadn't ever slept outside. Beverly was used to sleeping in cars or under awnings, but not in the woods.

But Stan had the prototype of the latest line in guide control twirled up along his spine. No way to remove it, not without risking paralyzation or worse, and no way to turn it off. He remembered when Dr. Geier had tested it, how interwoven it was through him. How they'd poked and prodded him. How Robert had said he was the *ticket out* .

Stan picked at the raised skin. They weren't going to let him go. Not this easily.

A bump to his side left Stan stumbling. His arm was pulled up, fingers still twined tightly in Richie's own as he held him upright; hand held against his chest.

"C'mon, babe," He said. Smile wide, "Adventure awaits."

Adventure. Adventure involved a lot of fucking walking. And a lot of

Richie talking about it.

“Can we sit?” He’d call up to Beverly or whoever would respond with a quick, “No.”

It was two days to Weed ‘ *The one big perk of dating a felon - Stanley, please, ow*’ with one giant stretch of forest between them. Eddie seemed confident enough in his guidance; pointing whenever Ben would ask. Sometimes even correcting them on his own. He’d smack his thick parka, an echoed *whap* at the weather lined material, and everyone would wait for him to adjust with the map holder until they were sure where to go. The plot avoided most of the heavier terrain, a weaving mess between cliffs and dense forest without leading them back to either highway that flanked them. Noelle had worked hard at it. Stan hoped she’d be alright.

It was hard to walk with only one hand free, but Richie seemed reluctant to let him go. He would if Stan stared too long at their hands; or if he was caught doing the same. But Stan would snatch it back steps later. He got it. He stared for the same reason. Just to be sure he was there.

The first day wasn’t as horrible as Stan had feared - but the aches in his thighs began to pang as they huddled for lunch. It couldn’t be helped, he’d been locked up for weeks with no movement, but the days were sure to get worse. He tried to rub the pulls away as discreetly as he could, but Georgie and Eddie seemed to be in a similar boat. A quick pile of sandwiches were passed out before they slung their gear back on and kept due North.

“We’re making good time,” Beverly called, “If we keep this up we’ll be a little over halfway by nightfall.”

“We’ll need to stop just before that,” Mike corrected, “We don’t want to set up a tent in the dark.”

“At what point are we doing s’mores?” Richie asked, “Just taking a headcount,”

“At what point are you going to stop talking?” Beverly asked.

“Not talking will make walking easier,” Georgie offered, “Conserve oxygen,”

“Damn! Georgie coming in hot!”

“Leave the boy alone,” Stan begged, “He’s young.”

The roads were muddy, sluicing dirt and debris clogging the treads of their boots. Each step squelched with suction before popping free with a jarring tug. Stan held fast to Richie’s jacket sleeve, feeling like a toddler in the grocery, hanging to mama’s skirt so he wouldn’t get lost. Wouldn’t fall into the mouth of the cliff side.

The path was narrow, nearly walking single file through a tight curve of leeway. A steep edge greeted them, kissing their heels if they glanced too long. Stan didn’t know how long they’d been walking. How far. How much further they had to go. It felt endless. A continuous curve.

But his fatigue blinded him. His left shoe didn’t meet wet earth but horrible free space. His weight was shifting before he could correct it, a sinking feeling of standing in air. Floating until the cartoon looked down. He didn’t mean to. He didn’t want to. But the smiling maw of trees glinted dew like teeth.

He skid. His right knee cracking loudly with a twin shout from his lips. His arms pinwheeled, desperate for purchase, stupidly letting go of the grip to security he’d had.

“Stan!”

Stanley didn’t ease on purpose. Didn’t push. Not anymore. Wouldn’t even dream of it after the stinging razor found fresh skin with every try. But - but -

The forest smiled.

HELP ME

The hand fisted the scruff of his shirt, choking him as the ringed fleece dug against his windpipe when his weight fought against the salvation. Oh thank god. Oh god. Oh *fuck* . His own hands, clammy with adrenaline, found the grip on his shirt, gripping the wrist for security as he was tugged upright and onto stable wet ground.

“You know that doesn’t work on me, 51186.”

Stan turned. Eyes as wide as Rory’s rotting face. Her teeth bristled dark pine trees in a bloody, ripped open mouth. He screamed. And tipped.

The stones along the summit slope weren’t nearly as giving as the muddy bank. A sick crack echoed with the losers’ shouts to him as his skull met stone.

Awareness came back in a pulled lull. The moon fogged in his vision, almost fluorescent in its unfocused glow. Stan groaned, trying to shift, but the smooth cold floor was unforgiving.

He blinked. Tapped his fingers against the concrete. Concrete.

“You’re so pretty, 51186.”

Rory’s rotting skin nearly fell away as she smiled her pine needle grin. Stan tried to shift, but his legs - he couldn’t feel his legs -

“I love you. Call for your mom again. One more time. Let me see.”

Her pupils, grayed away and hollow, spun like a camera shutter. Clicking over and over at his horrified face. No nonono.

“I love you, 51186,”

Stan threw himself sideways with a shout, forehead whapping into the metal doorframe. His teeth rattled in his jaw, eyes clenched shut before focusing again. It's okay. It's not - this isn't -

“They haven’t f-f-found me yet.”

Stan opened his eyes. Bill was laying against the wall across from him. Slumped with a bleeding stomach wound. Hurt in his eyes. Just like Stan had left him.

“N-N-No one has come l-l-l-looking,” He whispered, “They j-just want you. I’m still up h-h-h-here. W-w-with them.”

No. Enough. God.

"I d-d-d-didn't die for hours. No one came to h-h-h-help me. They j-j-j-just b-b-boarded up the h... h-hallway."

He coughed. Blood spilled across his scarred cheek.

“You j-j-j-just keep l-leaving me,” The voice was that of a child. Of little Big Bill. No older than five when he first asked if Stan wanted to play trucks, “You l-l-left m-m-me and they haven’t f-f-found me y-y-y-y-y-”

A hand found Stan's throat, cold and cruel and small.

“Let me make you beautiful, 51186,”

Stan inhaled.

“NO!” He wailed, screaming until even his own throat rejected it into a shrill hacking cough. Hands were all over him, covering his mouth, holding him down - no - no -

“Stan - ! Stan!”

“Wake up!”

“Stanley!”

They were going to cut him. Hurt him. Skin him and keep him on their wall. Use him until he wasn't anything and leave him with Bill who was *alone oh god* -

Wa k e u p

A slap rang out across the room. Stan's cheek whipped over to meet the tacky lining of the tent floor. His hand, still held fast, tapped against it. Tarp. He was in the tent.

All six of them huddled over his shaking form. Rain pattered down on the slicked canvas dome around them. Eddie and Richie sat closest to his head, the former's arm still poised in the air to strike him again.

“Back in the land of the living?” Richie asked, throat clicking as his wide eyes flicked across Stan's face, “Stan the man? Can you hear me?” Stan's throat worked, trying to respond, before settling on a nod, “Okay, rad. Do you know where you are?” Another nod.

But with awareness came the shame. His face burned, a mottled flush taking his face and throat as he tried to twist away.

“No, no,” Beverly said, “None of that, c'mon, Uris.”

The tent was cold, even through their layers and insulation. But none of them dug back into their individual sleeping bags. Instead Mike and Beverly unzipped them all to lay flat, throwing them across and beneath the pile of them. It hardly seemed functional, and if Stan felt any more stable or aware he'd surely say something about it. But for now he let them curl around him. Richie on his left, Eddie on his right. The rest of them stacked out across fluff lined sleeping bags like seven little Sentinels. Stan remembered that nursery rhyme. How it was really about something offensive. How one would fall away.

He curled tighter between them all and slept instead.

The morning came slowly to them all; no one used to having to rise with the dawn. Aches and groans echoed between everyone quietly, the dirt floor beneath them unforgiving. But Stan woke with Richie's arm around him and his forehead brushing Eddie's own. At least no one commented on that.

Breakfast was over a portable griddle; spaghetti loaded onto small plates.

Richie asked through a large mouthful, "Are we eating our regretti?"

YOU ARE THE ONLY REGRET

"Stanley, please, contain the gremlin."

Ben laughed, "I mean I could just not tell you what he's saying?"

Richie shook his head, jabbing a marinara covered fork, "It's the intention. I *feel* the attack."

Eddie smiled wide and stuck one finger high.

"He -"

"- I got that one, Haystack. Thanks."

Eddie had picked up the alphabet literally overnight. But it gave him a confidence Stan hadn't seen since they would lay side by side on an old mattress and whisper secrets. It was all his own - something he could control. Ben would correct T's from N's and X or R, but Eddie was solidly independent. He still needed Ben to translate for everyone else, but Stan was starting to catch the pattern on more clear signs. Eddie still signed slowly, carefully, enough that it was easy to track the letters.

Richie brought a plate of spaghetti over to Stan, plopping down beside him as he loudly slurped. Their provisions were hotdogs and noodles until the next town which, if Mike was right, wouldn't be for

six days.

“Gotta carboload,” Richie promised, “Makes you run fast.”

Stan nodded as he ate, “Or vomit,”

“Yeah. One of the two,” Richie agreed.

Piper had made a home in the crook between Stan’s neck and scarf, bundled and warm and trying to snag pieces of pasta. Stan finally pulled her out to eat out of a small bowl of birdseed instead. She huffed and nipped him but ate happily moments later.

Stan hummed, watching Richie try to flick a noodle at Georgie who was admittedly more amused than anyone else would’ve been, “Do you remember when you threw a coffee?”

Richie groaned, “Don’t even,” He grouched, “I’d suck a dick for some coffee right now,”

“I feel like you’d suck a dick for a lot less.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Richie relented. His cheeks dusted pink beneath his scarf, “I just wanted to talk to you a little longer.”

Stan smiled at that, remembering how they’d both been so jittery. For very different reasons; but still. “You didn’t get anywhere near the trash can,”

“It was practically a rim shot -” Richie insisted.

“- At *least* ten feet short,” Stan spread his arms wide for emphasis. Georgie laughed. Richie threw another noodle.

“This is abuse, Stanley, and I will continue to stand for it.”

The group laughed as conversation lulled in favor of eating. It wasn’t until his plate was nearly clean that Stan mumbled, “I think that was when I realized I liked you,”

“What? My display of physical prowess?”

"No, no," He snickered, but, "You went and picked it up. And you said... yote,"

"Yeet," Richie hummed.

"Yeah, 'yeet', and you threw it away. I don't know," Stan shrugged, standing up to stack Richie's plate atop his own, "It was cute."

"You're cute,"

"Gross."

Georgie and Stan cleaned the dishes off as much as a wet rag would allow. Thankfully everyone was hungry enough to practically lick them clean. The bags were repacked and the walking started once more.

"Is this our life now?" Richie asked, "Walking?"

"Well, we peasants had a habit of it before this," Beverly offered.

"Disgusting," Richie whined, "Simply awful."

The second day, worse than the first, left them all wobbling on their legs. It was blessedly uneventful, and almost enjoyable if Stan could pretend his knees didn't over extend with each step. But the hand carved sign of WEED was like an oasis.

They would go to the campground Noelle had mentioned, just outside of town, for the night. It had facilities and running water and was enough in the off season for travelling that they'd be as close to alone as they'd get anywhere else.

"Okay, we need to go into town for supplies and we need to set up camp," Mike said, all of the seven stopping on the main road where the campground and town edge split, "Two groups."

"I'll go into town," Stan offered. He tried not to let the need come through. Stores? Doors that opened when you pushed? Practically a myth.

"I don't..." Ben began, but Mike cut in with a smile.

"Me and Beverly will go with you. Ben and Richie can set up camp with Eddie and Georgie," Richie sat up, ready to argue, but Mike continued, "Sentinels draw attention. You aren't as good at hiding as we are."

"Yeah," Beverly agreed, hugging Stan close to her breast, "Big three. Original musketeers. We'll be fine."

Stan looked to Mike, who had a kind smile that never felt anything but true across his cheeks. Big three. A fight rang through his head.

"You're not my friend you're my fucking keeper!"

It felt like lifetimes ago. When things were in a limbo but he had two people in his life he could hope to count on. He'd resented them. Hated how involved they were; how intertwined they'd become in his day to day. How they acted like he needed them.

Stan looked at Mike, dirty with mud caked shoes. At Beverly whose cheeks were pink with the bite of cold. Hiking through the woods with not one, but three enemies of the state. Crossing state and country lines - risking being shot on sight - to get him to safety.

"There's almost nothing in this world that isn't against you and I - we just wanted to be on your side."

Stan held Beverly close, his freckles aligning with her own as their cheekbones brushed.

"We'll be fine," Stan assured Richie, "They're on my side."

The town was hardly more than a handful of streets. A few storefronts still held Christmas lights, sales and hand painted signs decorating empty walkways with only a handful of pedestrians nodding with smiles as they walked.

Stan stayed between his two partners, head tucked into his scarf; both a shield from the cold and a barrier between his surgical scar and rubbernecking strangers. Clearly newcomers weren't normal this time of year, but no one was being openly rude about it. In fact, the smiles felt more like being back in Derry than just a day's drive from Los Angeles. But Stan knew small town smiles. Small town secrets.

He smiled back and kept his eyes ahead. Only guides looked away.

The general store was two stories, an entire level lined with barrels of candy and souvenirs for their namesake. It was sweet, literally and beyond, and Stan fiddled with a "Welcome to Weed!" keychain he was sure Richie would laugh at.

The three split up in the store, Stan was supposed to get more layers he thought they might need now that two days had been braved and it would only get colder. He had three sets of gloves under one arm, all lined and weather resistant, along with a fresh set of socks for all of them. An old woman behind the counter told him about putting gallon bags on his feet to keep his feet dry so he grabbed a box of those just to try. Three tubes of chapstick, toothpaste, and a small bottle of shampoo. He already felt a layer of grime across his scalp and he was sure it wouldn't get more forgiving. Freezing rivers or not he wanted to be clean if he could help it.

The feeling of shopping, especially alone, was so otherworldly and soothing that Stan forgot he was a fugitive and murderer until Mike came up behind him with a firm grip on his elbow. His face didn't give anything away, but the vice was crushing. Stan didn't know what was wrong, only that something had to be, before looking above the cashier's head on the other side of the floor.

Right beside the cigarettes and condoms was a glass case, pristine and cold in a way that felt interloping among old cherry wood floors and thick hanging rugs. Missing posters.

Most held children. Some hardly ten. With photos of their parents beside them. Guardians were listed as criminals. Parents protecting their kids, trying to save them, viewed as kidnappers. But that wasn't new. Wasn't jarring in the way that seeing his own face was.

STANLEY THOMAS URIS
LOST ROGUE
DANGEROUS

Stan had never seen a rogue called dangerous before. But two photos of him were on the wall, larger, overbearing to the surrounding print outs. Stark colored frames of his unmarred face and long overgrown curls. That had been taken during trials. After the surgery.

DO NOT APPROACH

Stan blinked.

DANGEROUS

Mike was turning him away, voice soft and light, "Go find Bev. Get out of here. Give me your stuff."

Stan obeyed without even a nod. He went down the steps into the sub level even though his brain screamed to run for the exit. Beverly was wrapped up in groceries, trying to figure out what would be easiest to travel with without dealing with canned goods. Stan approached her easily, happily, but his voice was grave.

"We need to go. Now."

Beverly dropped the cans.

They waited in an alleyway for Mike. Not willing to leave him behind, but instead keeping him just in sight from the front store windows dusty scope. Beverly, who had bought a pack of smokes before even bothering to walk around the store, took long drags as she stared. There were photos of him. And they were North. Hoping they'd think only Mexico was a bust.

Mike crossed the street to them, a fresh colored photo in his hands, "They're passing out flyers, they're looking hard,"

"What does this mean?" She asked him, "Are there patrols? Choppers? We didn't plan for this soon - we needed to be in the forest by now. We could walk through the night. I think, if we're careful we -"

"- Bevvie," Stan mumbled, eyes looking past her to a storefront a block away.

"What?" She asked.

"How good are you with scissors?"

The box read 1B. True Black. An elegant model with jet struck hair swirling around her smiled from the cover. The Exxon bathroom was disgusting, and no amount of toilet paper made sitting atop the seat any cleaner.

"Almost done," Beverly said, the bottle squirting loudly in Stan's ear as goo swiped along his hairline. Blonde curls covered the floor, Mike had laid paper towels out to catch them. Some were stained with the dye's fallout.

"Should you go get Eddie?" She asked Mike.

"No," He said, "He wasn't on the wall. I looked." He twirled the scissors in an easy grip, "I'm sure he wouldn't mind a haircut though,"

"Just buzz it," Stan said, "It'd look amazing."

"He'd kick you just for saying that," Beverly laughed, "Okay... done. Now we wait twenty minutes."

"No one's gonna come banging on the door?" Stan asked.

"You saw the population outside," Mike shrugged, "Pretty sure we're the first visitors since fall." Stan stared ahead, past them both before Mike asked, "Where'd you go?"

"It said dangerous," Stan mumbled.

“Yeah,” Beverly agreed, ready to comfort - to console. She had seen what he’d done. What he was capable of doing.

“They’re...” He paused. A smile on his face that he couldn’t quite explain, “They’re afraid of me.”

Neither responded for a long moment. Stan was momentarily worried that sounded even more insane than it had seemed to his own ears. But then a laugh boomed, far too loud for their covert beauty salon. Mike wiped an eye, grin wide. Proud.

“Damn right they are.”

“I was gone for two hours and you made him goth.” Richie laughed.

“Don’t pretend he isn’t even hotter now, Tozier,” Beverly snapped, “Do you see this undercut? Amazing. Flawless. A goth woodland king.”

“Please stop,” Stan whined, but laughed at Eddie’s saucer gaze, “Want a haircut, Eds?”

Beverly didn’t go as bold for Eddie, instead just cutting until his wavy chocolate tresses were out of his eyes and off his ears. He looked once again that weird blend of childish and aged. Hair combed over and young with wide youthful eyes that held a depth no one should be capable of. Georgie quietly requested a cut which Beverly happily obliged; giving him a trim somewhere between Stan and Eddie’s new look. Richie demanded he be next, but relented when Bev called his bluff and cut a huge chunk of wild hair off the nape of his neck.

Camp was private. An RV sat at the opposite end but they seemed just as keen to interact with strangers as the rest of them. Their seven person tent and secondary smaller one meant to hold their packs from the elements. Between the two was a small set up for their griddle and rolled sleeping bags as chairs. Piper was delighted to be

back with Stan, scritchng her beak along the freshly shorn sides of his inky hair.

“I think she’s into your new edgy look,” Richie offered. He was sprawled out before him, half on his bag and half using the rocky spot to his advantage in a horrible attempt at a recliner.

“There was a poster of me in town.”

“Did someone see - “

“- No,” Stan assured, quick to shut down any hysteria that was sure to bubble out of the group, “No one saw. Mike made sure.”

“God bless Mike,” Ben sighed.

“But they know we’re going North,” Stan continued, “Or that we might be. I don’t - Beverly mentioned patrols,”

POSTER?

“Not of you,” He reassured, but it felt cruel. Eddie didn’t seem to care he was forgotten though. Noticeably relaxing in his huddle, “But we just figured,” He pointed at his hair, “Better to change.”

The group agreed, they needed to get deep into the national parks by tomorrow. Leave at first light again. But for now another pile of campers was yards away and looking panicked wouldn’t help anyone. So everyone ate and laughed and let themselves breathe for at least as long as the moon wouldn’t guide their path.

“You okay?” Richie whispered after Georgie had fallen asleep. Piper back in Stan’s coat and Beverly already guiding the smaller boy to the tent for the night.

“I just,” He hesitated, biting on the seam of his lower lip. The wanted poster was creasing in his grip. He didn’t even remember them taking a picture, but they must’ve at some point. He was in the Center uniform. His hair was still short. Face unscarred.

LOST ROGUE
DANGEROUS

"What?" Richie asked. He twisted on his rocky seat, craning in a way that was just a little stupid to meet Stan's eyes again. Stan smiled, ducking his head at the shape Richie's spine decided it was capable of.

He tipped forward, pitching his voice too low for anyone else to hear, "I don't see how we get a happy ending," Richie turned fully at that, but Stan pressed on, "I mean, I'm not trying to be dark but -"

"- I know," Richie said, halting the words Stan didn't want to think too hard about. He took the poster out of his hands, slowly tearing it until only indiscernible scraps fluttered to the dirt, "I know. But, like, the good and the bad - right? You've had a hard time, a horrible time. But then you met me!" Stan kicked him despite the burning in his ears, "Ow, rude, my god - but you did. And Beverly and Ben and Mike is okay too - stop *kicking* me - so: good. And then... yeah."

Richie still didn't know what had happened, not a clear picture at least; just whatever bits Stan spit out while either crying or screaming. But he wasn't an idiot. He saw it. Stan thought he saw it *in* him - like Stan carried it inside now. Something he couldn't ever wash away.

"Bad," Richie said, eyes wide and open to him, "Really bad. The - the fucking worst, honestly."

"Yeah," Stan agreed. But Richie wasn't done. The two nearly nose to nose as he twisted to kneel between Stan's folded legs.

"So, you're owed. You, Stanley Uris, are owed the fucking motherload of good," His hands came up to squeeze Stan's cheeks, gently and mindful of the healing cuts, but with a childish sort of love to it, "And I'd say a happy ending is due, psycho."

Stan tucked his hands deep into his jacket, a blush of joy overtaking him at Richie's raw honesty. Cold metal bit against his skin. Stan's brow furrowed, Richie's own mirroring at the change in expression, and pulled out... a small keychain.

Welcome to Weed!

“Did Stan the man... *shoplift* ?”

“I - Mike had come up and I...”

“For *me* ?”

Richie kissed away whatever response Stan had. He yanked the cord from his hoodie and looped it through the dangling gold plated ring. It clattered against his chest, gaudy and ridiculous and - just -

“I love it.”

Stan kissed him.

Author's Note:

let me know if it sucked.

tumblr: birdboyinthedeadlights